

No 27

5 CENTS.

FAME AND FORTUNE WEEKLY.

Stories of
BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

STRUCK OIL; OR, THE BOY WHO MADE A MILLION.

By A SELF-MADE MAN



Dane sprang upon the low stone wall, brandishing his stout cudgel, and, closely followed by Brackett, made a dash at the plotters. Though taken by surprise, one of the rascals snatched a stick from the fire and stood on the defensive.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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CHAPTER I.

FOUL PLAY.

"HELP!"

The wailing cry of a human being in distress was borne down on the wings of the wind to the ears of two stout boys trudging across a desolate and marshy stretch of country in the State of Indiana.

"What's that?" cried Harry Dane, pausing suddenly and clutching his companion by the arm.

"Sounded like the cry of some one in trouble," replied his friend, Phil Deering.

"Help! .Oh, help!"

"There it is again," exclaimed Dane. "Seems to come from that direction," and he pointed off to the right. "What a fierce night this is, Phil!"

And truly it was.

The rain was beating down fiercely on the landscape, driven across the bleak waste by the howling wind; the lightning flashed, with bewildering intensity, at frequent intervals, followed almost immediately by deafening peals of thunder, that seemed to rip the sky into fragments.

Night had fallen more than an hour before.

Even in the daytime this section of the country was a difficult place to traverse, for there was no regular road

intersecting it, and its marshy land was only crossed by rugged paths, half-overgrown with grass and weeds and stubble—every path being exactly like another, and all seeming to lead nowhere.

No human habitation could be seen, and very few trees.

All that relieved the monotony was here and there a hillock, crowned by some stunted bushes, or a green, stagnant pool, with tall rushes nodding on its bank, or an occasional gnarled, weather-beaten oak, its topmost branches bent by the wind.

Harry Dane and Phil Deering, his chum, who lived on adjoining farms in that neighborhood, had, in an effort to escape the approaching thunder-storm, attempted a short cut, with which they were familiar, across this perilous spot; but, unfortunately, they were caught in the midst of the place by storm and darkness, which swooped down on them with unexpected suddenness.

Bewildered by the driving rain and uproar of the elements, they unconsciously wandered out of their way, and ere long awoke to the fact that they were all at sea in that particularly dangerous locality.

To retreat was as dangerous as to advance; and so on they pressed, sinking every now and then into the soft, clayey soil, and recovering the dry path with greater difficulty as they advanced.

The country around seemed to mingle in one black, indistinguishable mass with the dark, threatening clouds, and the only gleams that illuminated the landscape at all were the flashes of lightning which tore brilliant gashes in the firmament from time to time.

And these gave them no help.

They only served to show them the desolate character of the waste on every side, and to prove to them how utterly they were lost in the night and storm.

It was in the midst of their perplexities that the cry for help came to their ears.

"Some poor fellow, lost like ourselves in this spot, must have slipped into a bog-hole and can't get out," continued Harry Dane. "We can't desert him, Phil. We must try to find and help him. If we don't he will surely perish."

"That's right," acquiesced his friend. "I'm with you, though I don't see as we are so much better off ourselves. Blessed if I have the least idea where we are at this minute."

"Help! Help! Would you murder me?"

The cry was more desperate, more insistent than before, and certainly more startling, for the added words were thrillingly significant of something more than mere accidental distress—it looked as if something like foul play was on the tapis.

"What shall we do, Phil?" asked Dane. "I'm almost afraid to say what I think."

"It—it looks like murder, doesn't it, Harry?" gasped Deering, with blanched cheeks.

Each of the boys had a stout stick in his hand, which they had been using to feel their way along.

"It looks mighty bad," replied Dane.

"Help, for heaven's sake!" came the cry again, though it was almost cut in twain by the crash of thunder which followed an unusually blinding flash of electricity.

"Follow me, Phil. I can't stand off when there's a human being in such distress as that man appears to be."

"But we're liable——"

A distant scream of pain cut his words in two.

"You hear that, Phil? Will you hang back? Whatever the danger, we've got a couple of tough sticks to defend ourselves with. Come on."

Thus urged, Phil Deering followed close after his brave young leader, and both splashed ahead through the muck and water that beset their path the moment they forsook the patch of dry ground they had been standing on.

Though they listened intently for further sounds from the distressed man, they heard nothing more to help guide them to the spot.

They kept on, however, in the direction in which they had located the cry for help.

At length a row of stunted bushes appeared right before them.

Pushing their way through these, they came upon a storm-bent tree, whose gnarled roots rose, bare and twisted, and weird-looking, high above the marshy waste.

The soil about it was hard and firm to the touch of their

feet, and it was with a feeling of intense relief that once more they felt something solid to stand upon.

"Why, there's a light yonder," suddenly shouted Phil, in great delight.

"So there is," replied Dane. "I never knew there was a house in this section."

"We must have strayed some distance from where we've been accustomed to cross this Lord-forsaken locality."

"I guess we—hello! what's this?"

Harry Dane had stumbled against some object in his path.

It was lying partly among the exposed roots of the big tree.

As the boys stooped to see what it was, a brilliant flash of lightning lit up the place for a moment with noon-day brightness, and both of the boys saw the figure of an old man with a long white beard stretched out before them.

There was a gash across his forehead, and his face and the upper part of his beard were streaked with blood.

"By gracious!" exclaimed Phil. "That's Matthew Rock, the hermit. Is he dead?"

"I don't know," replied his companion, kneeling down beside the motionless body, as an intense darkness succeeded the flash and detonating thunder.

"Well?" inquired Phil, eagerly, as Dane bent his head to the old man's chest.

"His heart is beating, but not very strong," answered Harry.

"It must have been his cry we heard," said Phil.

"I think there is no doubt of that. Can you still see that light, Phil?"

"Yes, plainly."

"It's not very far away."

"No."

"Have you the nerve to go there and see if you can get assistance?"

His companion hesitated.

"If there was any one there, he ought to have heard the old man cry out, and have come out here to see what was the matter."

"That seems reasonable. Perhaps this poor old fellow lives there himself."

"As he seems to have been the victim of an assault, perhaps the fellows who attacked him are at that house now," said Phil, who did not relish the idea of leaving Dane and going to the house alone.

"Not unlikely. Well, we had better go together and see what we can make out of the place, and then we can come back here afterward."

Deering had no objection to this plan, and they put it into execution at once.

The boys found there was a solid path leading from the tree right up to the house, which turned out to be merely a rude one-story shanty.

They approached it with all due caution, for they did not want to run themselves into a trap.

And it was well they did, for when Dane crept up to the solitary window, through which the light shone, to recon-

noiter the interior, he was a bit startled to see three rough-looking men inside turning things topsy-turvy generally, as if they were in search of something they expected to find somewhere in the place.

"Look," whispered Harry in his companion's ear, "there are three hang-dog rascals inside turning the room inside out."

Phil looked, and was duly impressed by what he saw.

"It all seems clear to me now," said he. "You know, it has often been hinted around that Matthew Rock is a miser. People believe he has money hidden away in his house, the location of which few persons seem to know. These rascals must have got wind of the intelligence, and made a point of hunting him out to relieve him of his rumored wealth."

"That sounds reasonable. They must have enticed him from his cabin first, struck him down at the spot where he lies, and then came to the house to search for their expected booty."

"They don't seem to have much success about finding anything."

"I'll bet they won't give up till they find what they're after, or become satisfied he didn't have anything. One of them is prying up the hearthstone now."

"That is a likely place to look if the old fellow buried his money, supposing he had any to bury."

"Then I should say he would be a fool to put it in such a place."

Another of the rascals came to help the fellow who was prying up the flat stone in front of the old-fashioned open fireplace.

They yanked the stone up in short order, and the man who started the job began to probe the earth with the blade of a long, ugly looking knife.

There were no satisfactory developments, and they gave it up in very bad humor.

The boys watched them through the window until they finally stopped searching and held a consultation.

Apparently they had tapped every conceivable spot where anything might be concealed, and had examined the flooring carefully, without the slightest success.

They were at their wits' end, and from their looks and gestures the boys judged they were angry and disgusted over the unprofitable result.

Finally they walked out of the place.

"We'd better sneak around to the back," said Dane, drawing his companion with him. "I shouldn't want to fall into the clutches of those rascals, the way they feel at this moment. I'm thinking they wouldn't do a thing to us."

"I wouldn't trust them," agreed Phil.

It had stopped raining by this time, the wind had greatly moderated, and the storm was passing away to the northwest.

"They're jabbing away at the front of the cabin," said Harry, peering about the corner of the habitation.

"I hear them all right," replied Phil. "I wish they'd get a move on."

As if in answer to the boy's wish, the three ruffians started off into the gloom in a direction opposite to that where poor Matthew Rock lay among the roots of the old oak tree.

Their feet made no sound in the damp sod, so the boys did not dare make a move until sufficient time had elapsed to carry them a reasonable distance from the cabin.

"We must fetch the old man here and then get a doctor for him," said Dane.

"Maybe he's dead by this time," replied Phil.

"I hope not. I noticed a lantern on a shelf inside. We'd better get it."

They entered the cabin, which had been pretty thoroughly wrecked by the ruffians, and Dane took possession of and lighted the lantern.

"Fix that bunk as well as you can, Phil. We'll have to put him in it, you know."

Deering replaced the scattered straw in the ticking, which had been split up and denuded of its contents by the villains, placed it in the wooden bunk against the wall, and returned the bedclothes in proper order.

"Here's some brandy, I guess," he remarked.

"That's good. It will serve to revive the old man," replied Dane. "Bring it along," and he started for the door.

They found Matthew Rock in the self-same position they had left him, and looking so near like death that Phil was sure he had died while they were absent.

This proved not to be the case.

Dane poured some of the brandy down his throat, wiped the half-congealed blood from his face, and chafed his temples.

In a few minutes he uttered a sigh, groaned and then opened his eyes.

"Who are you?" gasped the old man, in a bewildered kind of way.

"We are friends. You have been badly hurt, I fear. Let us help you back to your cabin."

Matthew Rock offered no objection, and so the boys lifted him between them and bore him to his house, placing him in the bunk.

CHAPTER II.

THE CONFESSION OF MATTHEW ROCK.

THERE were the embers of a fire burning in the wide, open fireplace.

The boys started it up into a ruddy blaze by the addition of a quantity of dry wood which they saw piled up in a corner of the cabin.

Then they removed their sodden garments, for they were soaked to the skin, and hung them before the fire to dry.

Dane warmed some water and with a rag cleaned the blood as well as he could from the hermit's hair and beard, and bathed the nasty wound in his head.

He found another serious cut behind the man's ear, and

bound both wounds up in a fairly effective, if not scientific, fashion.

The old man, who seemed dazed, made no movement during it all, lying there like a log, with his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

"We must get a doctor for him," said Dane, after he had done all he could for the aged sufferer.

A small clock on a shelf above the fireplace struck the hour of nine at that moment.

"I s'pose we can't both go," replied Phil. "One of us ought to stay with him, don't you think?"

"Yes. I'll stay with him, unless you'd prefer to do so."

"No," answered Phil, shaking his head. "I'd rather try and find a doctor. The trouble is, I'm all twisted about. I really can't tell where we've got to in this marshy district. I may have trouble in finding my way out."

"You'd better start off in the course followed by those rascals. I've no doubt there's a path leading to one of the county roads in that direction."

"I hope there is."

"Are your clothes dry enough to put on?"

Phil felt of them.

"The undergarments are almost dry. The others will do, I guess."

He proceeded to get into his clothes.

As soon as he was fully dressed he took a look at the prospect outside.

"The sky has cleared and the moon is shining," he reported. "Best of all, I think I know where we are."

"That's encouraging," replied Dane.

"You know that big red house on the road to Prescott?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can see it from outside."

"Dr. Billings lives not far from that house."

"I know where his place is."

"You ought to have no trouble in reaching him, then. Bring him here as soon as you can. Tell him the old man received a couple of ugly wounds on the head and looks to be in a bad way."

"All right. I won't lose any time reaching the doctor, you may depend."

With these words Phil Deering took his departure.

Dane put on a portion of his clothes and then went to see how Matthew Rock was getting on.

He gave the old man another drink of the brandy, and the stimulant revived him somewhat.

"What is the matter with me, boy?" he asked, in shaky tones.

"Don't you remember being attacked by three rascals?" asked Harry.

The hermit of the marsh knitted his brows and seemed to be trying to collect his confused senses.

Suddenly he grasped the lad's wrist and cried, with some vehemence:

"Yes, yes; it all comes to me now. There were three of them. One came to my door and knocked in the height of the storm. He said he and a companion were crossing the marsh, and that his friend fell into a hole, and he

wanted me to come and assist him to rescue him. I listened to his deceitful story and followed him to the scarred oak, a short distance into the marsh, where he and two others set upon me with sticks and beat me about the head and body till I became unconscious. And did you find me there?"

"Yes; I and my friend, Phil Deering."

"And you brought me to the cabin?" he asked, gratefully.

"We did."

"Where is your companion now?"

"Gone for a doctor."

Matthew Rock shook his head slowly and somewhat sadly.

"I'm afraid he won't be able to do me any good. Those rascals have finished me."

"I hope not, sir," answered Dane, sympathetically.

"I shall never get over this," he said, slowly. "I feel it here," and he feebly laid his hand on his heart. "I should like to know your name, my lad."

"My name is Harry Dane."

The old hermit looked at him with a startled look in his eyes.

"Your father—was his name George Dane?"

"Yes, sir. Did you know him?"

The pallor on Matthew Rock's face seemed to deepen.

"Know him?" he answered, in hollow tones. "Yes, I knew George Dane. And you are his son. You found me dying under the scarred oak, and you brought me here. Boy, what will you think of me when I tell you that I grievously wronged your father?"

"Wronged my father! You!"

"Aye, my lad. I defrauded him out of a fortune."

Dane looked at Matthew Rock in astonishment.

Surely, the old hermit's brain had been affected by the blows he had received.

His father, now dead two years, never had a fortune to be robbed of.

Furthermore, he had never heard his father speak about Matthew Rock—nor his mother, either.

Clearly the old man's mind was wandering.

"Come nearer, my lad. I can't see you very well. I cannot die without repairing the injury I did your father. I must soon meet him in the next world, and I couldn't face him with that sin on my soul. Besides, I can carry nothing away with me when I die. I have no kith and kin to leave my property to. So, my boy, I mean to make you my heir. You shall have the property I cheated your father of, and which, with the fatality attending all ill-gotten things, never benefited me."

He paused a moment to recover his breath.

"He's crazy as a March hare," thought Harry.

"Listen, boy. Do you know the Wakeley farm property?"

"I ought to, sir. It adjoins ours on the east. It's been deserted for a number of years. Though within the last few months a gang of men has been boring for oil."

"Did you never hear that your father and John Wakeley

were very warm personal friends while they were neighbors?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wakeley caught the gold fever, at the time of the Cripple Creek discoveries, just after his wife died, and he went West to make his fortune."

"I heard about that, sir."

"And perhaps you heard that John Wakeley died in the mining district, without having made the fortune he went there to seek?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was with him when he died."

"You, sir?" exclaimed Dane, in some astonishment.

"Yes. I was his companion and friend at Cripple Creek. The night he died he asked me to draw up his will for him. He didn't have much to dispose of, he said, only a small farm in Blank County, Indiana, but he wanted to leave that to his old friend and former neighbor, George Dane. So I wrote the will as he directed, but, instead of inserting the name of George Dane, I put down my own name, for things had not gone well with me at the mines, and I saw my opportunity, as it was a simple matter to hoodwink a man already half-dead. I read the document to him as though it had been written just as he wished it done, and he was satisfied. Two witnesses were summoned, and he signed it in their presence, acknowledging it as his last will and testament. In half an hour he was dead, and the property which should have passed to Dane became mine."

Matthew Rock paused as though exhausted by the effort he was making, while Harry Dane, thoroughly amazed at his confession, regarded him with wide-open eyes.

"I did not immediately come on to claim the Wakeley farm, as had been my intention, for within a day or two luck, which previously had mocked me, took a sudden change for the better with me," continued the old hermit, an increasing shade of weakness showing in his voice. "So I stayed on at the Creek until I had made a considerable sum of money. Then the bottom dropped out of my claim, and, with the cash I had thus fortunately secured and John Wakeley's will in my possession, I made my way to this State. I established my right to the deserted farm, but for some reason I cannot explain I could not take possession of it. The spirit of the dead John Wakeley seemed to fill every nook and corner of the property, and I felt that it warned me off the place I had so treacherously acquired. So I took up my habitation in this cabin in the marsh, which some one had abandoned. Instead of depositing my money in the Prescott bank, I buried it in a spot where I could always watch over it. From that hour I shunned the society of man and became a recluse—an outcast, as it were. Why I adopted such a course is beyond me to explain. Some unseen influence guided my actions, and I was powerless to resist."

Once more the hermit paused, and it was some moments before he resumed again.

"I met your father several times and became friendly with him. My conscience urged me to make a clean breast of the matter of the farm to him, and then transfer to him

the property I had so unjustly acquired. Its possession had done me no good, and it really seemed to be of no great value. But the humiliation of such a confession deterred me, and before I finally decided what to do your father died. And so the matter rested for more than a year. Then one night I dreamed that a vast reservoir of crude oil lay beneath the Wakeley farm. I had been reading of the recent discovery of oil in Delaware County, in this State, and it is possible the newspaper story shaped my thoughts. However that may be, I was much impressed by my vision. Strange to say, I had the same dream on the succeeding two night. The possibility that oil might really underlie sections of this county sent the blood throbbing through my veins with excitement. Oil is America's greatest product, and it is a treasure that mines itself. It is the one product which dwarfs into insignificance the ordinary profits of commerce. The lifetime of an ordinary oil well is that of the lifetime of the average man, and some of them appear to be perpetual and unfailing."

The old man's eyes, until now dull and impassive, lit up with the light of an enthusiast.

The exhaustion of a moment before vanished like the morning dew under the rays of the rising sun.

New strength came into his voice, and for the next few minutes he looked like a regenerated person.

"Statistics show that Indiana ranks third in petroleum production, her oil territory being practically a continuation of the Pennsylvania fields. The State has over four hundred gas wells, which have, by supplying cheap fuel, wonderfully cheapened the progress of its manufacturing interests. The possibility of securing vast wealth took complete possession of my thoughts. Asleep or awake, the idea was always with me, and at last I set on foot a quiet investigation. I had the bowels of the Wakeley farm probed, but not until this morning did I receive the encouraging news I have eagerly looked forward to for so many weeks. It seemed as if Nature had placed every possible obstacle in the way of the drillers. Not only that, but bad luck attended the work continually. The finest tools broke, the derrick collapsed twice from no apparent reason, the men deserted at critical moments—everything, in fact, conspired to thwart my efforts to realize the dream of my life and waste the small capital I had with which to prosecute the enterprise. But the curse that hung about a fraudulently acquired property did not deter me. I persevered, determined to win in spite of an adverse fate. And now, when the end seems to be in sight, when the drilling has at last been successfully accomplished, and a 'shooter' has been sent for to try his hand at inducing the oil, which I know is below the surface of the Wakeley farm, to flow, I am struck down at the moment of victory. Well, my lad, it is only simple justice, after all. It is fated that I was not to profit by the fraud I had perpetrated. I might have died alone and helpless under the shadow of the scarred oak; but Heaven sent you, the son of the man I had wronged, to my aid in my hour of need, and to you I will now make restitution. The Wakeley property is yours by right of inheritance, and it will make you a wealthy boy."

Matthew Rock fell back on his pillow exhausted, leaving Harry Dane wondering if all he had been listening to from the old man's lips was not the product of a dream from which he had just awakened.

The hermit did not stir for ten minutes, but lay with closed eyes, breathing heavily.

Harry, afraid he might die in that state before the arrival of the doctor, gave him another drink of the brandy, and under its potent influence he seemed to acquire a new lease of his depleted strength.

"Quick, my lad, there is no time to lose, for I believe I am failing fast. You will find pen, ink and paper in the drawer of yonder table. Get them and write at my dictation."

CHAPTER III.

SEARCHING FOR THE BURIED MONEY.

MORE to humor the old man than because he believed anything would result from the matter, Harry Dane moved the table over near the bunk and prepared to take down what Matthew Rock had to say.

With an eager light in his eyes the hermit of the marsh dictated what he intended as his last will and testament.

He left everything of which he died possessed—the Wakeley farm, as it stood, together with the oil-boring machinery and appendages thereto already erected; also the balance of his money, buried in the center of the roots of the scarred oak—to Harry Dane, his heirs and assigns.

The last words were hardly written before Phil Deering and Dr. Billings entered the cabin.

"I am beyond your aid, doctor," said the old man, when the physician advanced to the bunk and took up his hand to feel his pulse. "When a man's time has come, of what earthly use is all the physic in the world? But I am glad you are here, for I need a witness to legalize an act of restitution already too long delayed."

Dr. Billings, however, proceeded to examine the sufferer.

His professional instinct soon told him that Matthew Rock had spoken truly—that his injuries were fatal, and his span of life was fast drawing to its close.

The best he could do was to give the old hermit a reviving draught, which temporarily brightened him up.

"Are you sure, doctor, that I am in the full possession of my right senses?" he asked, eagerly.

"Oh, yes," replied the physician. "There isn't the least doubt of that."

"You will be willing to swear, then, that this will I've had this lad write for me represents the exact sentiments of my mind?"

"Certainly, if you declare it to be such."

"I do declare it," replied Matthew Rock, eagerly. "The Wakeley farm was actually willed to George Dane, this boy's father, by its owner, John Wakeley, but by the fraud-

ulent substitution of my name in place of Dane's it was diverted to me."

This statement surprised Dr. Billings and Phil Deering as much as it had previously astonished Harry Dane.

"I have made a full confession of the circumstances to this lad," continued the old man, feebly indicating Harry, who stood near the foot of the bunk. "All that now remains is for me to sign that paper in your presence."

He motioned toward the sheet of writing which lay upon the table.

A book was brought, the paper placed upon it, and the pen placed between Matthew Rock's fingers by the doctor.

The hermit traced his signature in a tolerably clear hand.

"Now, doctor, you and the other lad will please attest my signature."

Dr. Billings and Phil Deering wrote their names as witnesses to the document.

That completed all necessary formalities.

"Doctor, you will see that Harry Dane comes into his own, will you not?"

"Certainly. There should be no difficulty about it."

From that moment Matthew Rock sank very fast.

The excitement and purpose he had in view, which had heretofore sustained his flagging energies, was now lacking, and he made no effort to ward off the inevitable.

He gradually drifted out upon the sea of eternity, and as the clock was striking midnight he breathed his last.

And so they left him, securing the door against intrusion, the doctor returning to his home and the boys going on to their respective farms.

Next morning, Harry, after notifying the proper village official of Matthew Rock's death, started out in company with Phil Deering to investigate the roots of the scarred oak and see if the hermit had really buried his money in that spot.

"You're a lucky boy, Harry," said Phil, as the two walked along the high road in the direction of the dead hermit's cabin.

On their way home the previous night Dane had told his friend all that took place between Matthew Rock and himself in the house while he (Phil) was away after the doctor.

"If things turn out as they promise to do, I am willing to believe I am," answered Harry, with some enthusiasm.

"What did your mother say when you told her?"

"She was very much astonished."

"I should think she would be. So was my father and mother when I told them of the adventure we had. You will get the Wakeley property, anyhow, for my father said there is no doubt but Matthew Rock was its recognized owner, and consequently had a perfect right to will it to whom he chose."

"It is not a very valuable farm in its present dilapidated state."

"That's true enough. Folks have often wondered why Matthew Rock never made an effort to put it into proper shape after John Wakeley's will was recorded and the

court had finally passed upon his legal rights to its ownership."

"It was a case of a disturbed conscience, if I am to judge from the old man's confession last night."

"There was something out of the usual order of things behind it all. I know several persons offered to lease the farm and work it either on shares or for so much annual rent, but he wouldn't have it. It is a fact, however, that he did offer it for sale once, but shortly withdrew it from the market, without giving any reason therefor."

"All I ever knew about him until last night was that he was generally regarded as a queer man, who seemed to distrust and keep aloof from the world generally."

"That's right. Just why he preferred to live in a lonesome cabin in the swamp-land, miles away from his own property, which he permitted to go to ruin and decay, puzzled a good many people."

"That was his own funeral, and no one had any right to inquire into his motives. There are a lot of eccentric people in this world, you know."

"You remember, it was four months ago that he started that gang of men, under a man named Dan Brackett, on the farm boring for oil."

"I remember it well enough, and I have heard people say that the work would amount to nothing. They claimed this county is out of the oil-producing belt."

"That's what my father says, too. He took no stock in the old man's scheme. When, after the preliminary surveys and so-called tapping, that big, unsightly derrick was built and an actual boring was begun, he laughed and said it was a waste of good money, and that the only result would be a 'dry hole.'"

"Well, the old man told me last night that the boring had been completed and a 'shooter' sent for to dynamite the bottom."

"Is that so?"

"That's what Matthew Rock said. He had the most astonishing faith that oil would be tapped. Wouldn't it be wonderful if his dream turned out to be a fact?" cried Harry, with some excitement in his tones.

"It would be a wonderfully lucky thing for you, all right," replied his friend, almost enviously. "Why, you would be able to get a mint of money out of the old place."

"I should suddenly become a sort of modern Monte Cristo, wouldn't I?"

"That's what you would."

"I'm afraid such a happy result is too good to be true."

"Oh, stranger things than that have happened."

"Sure they have; but, all the same, I'm not banking very heavily on such a result."

"If you struck oil you'd have a lot of speculators at your heels at once."

"All prepared to do me up if they could, eh?"

"That isn't any lie. You'd have to be on your guard. It would be up to you to figure out a good price for the property, unless you proposed to work it yourself."

"I'd need a good bit of money to attempt that."

"Well, perhaps we'll find a tidy bunch at the foot of the

scarred oak this morning where the old fellow directed you to dig for his wealth. He didn't give you any idea how much he had, did he?"

Dane shook his head.

"He didn't mention any sum at all. All I understood from him was that the roots of the oak, where we found him last night, was his bank. Whether there's much or little there now is a problem. He must have spent a good deal during the last four months in his efforts to locate the oil he had in his mind. The men haven't worked steadily, it is true, but for all that he was under considerable expense."

"I'll bet he was. Look at that derrick and all the tools we've seen around there, not to speak of that big tank, now almost completed, which he had put up, so sure was he that oil would result from the boring he had under way. I'm afraid you may consider yourself lucky if you find any money at all left."

"Well, we shall soon know," said Harry, as they came in sight of the cabin.

Dane had left the key of the house with the village official when he notified him of Matthew Rock's death, so they could not enter the habitation now even had they wished.

The small spade the old man had probably used to dig up and rebury his money as occasion called for was in its usual place in a little shed at the rear of the premises.

The boys had noticed it there when they were hiding from the three rascals who were responsible for the hermit's death.

The village constable was already searching for a trace of these scoundrels on the information furnished him by Dane that morning.

Should they be caught, Harry proposed to bring a charge of murder against them, relying upon the evidence he and Phil could furnish to bring them to trial.

Taking possession of the spade, the boys made a line for the scarred oak.

Selecting a small open space in the very center of the twisted roots, Harry commenced to dig, while Phil looked on with great interest and anticipation.

As spadeful after spadeful of earth was taken out of the hole their hopes began to sink.

"Maybe I haven't struck the right spot," said Harry, in a tone of disappointment.

"He mentioned that particular spot, didn't he?"

"He did."

"Well, dig all around the roots, and if nothing comes of it I'll begin to think the old fellow was off."

"He spoke so earnestly about his money, and took such pains to impress upon me the exact place where he said he kept it, that I shall be much cut up if I don't find it."

"I don't wonder, Harry. It is tough to have one's anticipations nipped in the bud."

Just then the edge of Dane's spade encountered an obstruction.

He began to toss the dirt out faster, while Phil knelt down eagerly to get a look at the object as it came into view.

CHAPTER IV.

THE NEW OWNER OF THE WAKELEY FARM VISITS THE PROPERTY.

It proved to be an ordinary japanned iron box wrapped in heavy brown paper.

Phil lifted it out by the handle.

"It's not very heavy," he remarked; "but that doesn't cut any ice, for paper money is light, you know."

He shook it.

"There's a package in there all right—a bunch of money, I suppose. Allow me to congratulate you, old man."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry, Phil. Might be a packet of old papers, for all we can tell now."

"Well, open it; then we can settle the matter."

"I wish I could."

"Didn't the old man give you the key?"

"No. He forgot, I suppose, and I never thought to ask him."

"He probably has it on his clothes, then. We'll have to wait around the cabin till Mr. Boothby shows up to take the body to his undertaking shop."

They did not bother to fill up the hole, but, taking the iron box, returned to the cabin and sat down on the outside in the glorious morning sunshine.

It was two long hours before they heard the wheels of Mr. Boothby's wagon coming along the road.

"You'd better run and show him the way here, Phil," suggested Dane. "He won't be able to bring his wagon all the way. Tell him to tie up on the edge of the wood."

Phil accordingly started off to meet the village sexton.

In due time Harry saw Mr. Boothby and Phil coming toward the cabin, bearing a long box between them, such as paupers were buried in.

The undertaker unlocked the door of the cabin and they carried the box inside.

The body of Matthew Rock lay upon the bunk, his eyes serenely closed as the physician had fixed them, just as they had left him the night before.

"I want to find the key to this box," said Harry to Mr. Boothby. "He ought to have it somewhere about his person."

The undertaker searched the dead man's pockets, and the key was finally found in an inner pocket of his vest.

Dane placed the box on the table, found that the key fitted the lock, and opened it without difficulty.

The contents of the box consisted of a package of bills.

"The old man had money, after all, just as people thought," remarked Mr. Boothby.

"Why wouldn't he have it?" asked Phil. "He couldn't carry on his oil-digging operations on wind, could he?"

"Well, hardly," admitted the undertaker. "Where did you boys find that box?" he added, curiously.

"Where the old man told Dane to look for it."

"And to whom will this money go? The county, I sup-

pose, will take charge of it until the old fellow's heirs, if any, turn up."

"Not on your life," replied Phil. "Matthew Rock left his farm and his money to Harry Dane."

"Is it possible!" exclaimed the undertaker, in great surprise. "Did he make a will?"

"That's what he did."

"How much money is in that bunch?" Mr. Boothby asked, with avaricious eagerness.

"I shan't count it now," replied Harry, "but I should say there is quite a bunch. I shall hand it over to my mother, who is administratrix under the will."

"You ought to give the old man a pretty decent funeral," said Mr. Boothby, eager to turn a few dollars of the wad in his own direction.

"I mean to—a first-class one."

"Then I presume I may wait on your mother for my orders in that respect," said Mr. Boothby, a bit obsequiously.

"No. I will call at your house this afternoon and make all the necessary arrangements for the burial."

"Very well, Master Dane. You can select the style of casket you prefer and I will get it from Prescott early tomorrow. Now, if you young gentlemen will help me lift the body into the box, and then carry the box to my wagon, we will get this little matter over with."

It was not a job that either Harry or Phil relished, as they were not used to handling a corpse; but it had to be done, so, of course, they offered no objection to lending a hand.

After the body had been removed from the house Harry locked the door and retained possession of the key himself.

The two boys rode part of the way to the village on Mr. Boothby's wagon, then they went to the Dane farmhouse.

"We've found the money, mother," exclaimed Harry, when he and Phil entered the pleasant sitting-room where Mrs. Dane was sewing.

"Is it possible!" she replied, with a smile, for she had had her doubts about the buried money, though she did not mention them to her son.

"Now we will count it," he said, placing the iron box on the table, unlocking it and taking out the package of bills. It figured up a little over six thousand dollars.

"That isn't so bad," remarked Harry. "Matthew Rock must have made quite a wad at Cripple Creek, for he certainly has spent many thousand dollars looking for oil on the Wakeley farm."

"A fruitless search, I am afraid," she replied, shaking her head as if she had but little faith in such an enterprise.

"Well, mother, that remains to be seen."

"Surely, my son, you do not propose to spend any of this money in following up such a wild-goose chase?" she asked, in some surprise.

"Well, I tell you, mother, I mean to test the boring which, I understand, has just been completed. It would be foolish not to do that. In fact, a professional 'shooter' and the necessary nitroglycerine have already been sent for and are expected to arrive in a day or two. If the experiment

proves a failure, we will then decide, after taking Mr. Brackett's advice, whether we will throw up the whole thing or make another attempt to find oil."

"Very well, Harry. I shall not oppose your wishes in the matter. You are old enough to think for yourself."

"If we could strike a big gusher, that would be better than a gold mine," cried Harry, enthusiastically.

"Provided, of course, that you could market the goods," interjected Phil.

"What's to prevent me?"

"You'd have to get the railroad to furnish you with tank cars, so you could get your raw material to the refinery."

"What's the matter with sending it in barrels?"

"You'd have to have a lot of them, for my father says a first-class gusher will turn out from three hundred and fifty to four hundred barrels of crude oil in a month. If you tapped oil in one spot, you ought to be able to tap it in another, so as to increase your output. You'd want to raise capital right off and go into business shipshape, in order to make money. If it was me, I'd form a company and have myself elected president of it," grinned Phil.

"Well, Phil, we mustn't hullo till we're out of the wood. Time enough to consider all that when we have actually struck oil. If we begin counting our chickens before they're hatched we might suffer a terrible disappointment."

"That's right, too, Phil. Let's go over and see what Mr. Brackett thinks about the situation. You haven't notified him yet of the old man's death, and that you have succeeded to the property."

So the boys went over to the Wakeley farm, Harry carrying Matthew Rock's will with him to show to Dan Brackett.

They found Brackett with the working gang clearing away the rigging and the drill tools from the towering derrick in readiness for the "shooter," who was expected to arrive on the following day with the necessary quantity of nitroglycerine.

"Hello, boys," greeted the foreman, in his genial way. "Fine day, isn't it?"

"Sure," replied Phil.

"I see you're getting ready to shoot the well, as they call it," said Harry. "That looks as if you really thought you were going to find oil."

"That's right," replied Brackett. "We've actually struck oil-bearing rock, but, as there's no flow, we're going to stir it up with a nitroglycerine pill. If you want to see a great sight, come around early to-morrow afternoon. We expect to have the expert here by that time. Mr. Rock will be tickled to death when the oil spouts."

"No, he won't, Mr. Brackett," replied Harry, solemnly.

"He won't!" exclaimed Brackett, with a grin. "Well, just you come around to-morrow and watch him."

"I see you haven't heard the news," said the boy.

"What news?"

"About Mr. Rock."

"What about him?"

"I'm sorry to tell you, Mr. Brackett, but Matthew Rock is dead."

"Is what?" gasped the foreman of the derrick gang.

"He's dead. Struck down near his cabin last night in the midst of the thunder-storm by scoundrels whose object was evidently robbery."

"My gracious! is it possible?" ejaculated Brackett. "Just on the eve of success, too. What will become of the Wakeley farm now? I wonder who will come into possession of it?"

"Read that paper, Mr. Brackett," said Harry, handing him the will. "It will give full information on the subject."

CHAPTER V.

STRUCK OIL.

"AM I to understand that you are the new owner of Wakeley farm, young man?" asked Dan Brackett, looking at Harry Dane.

"That's what the paper says, Mr. Brackett, does it not?" replied Harry, with a smile.

"It certainly does. I was not aware that Mr. Rock took so much interest in you. In fact, I don't remember ever hearing him mention your name."

"Matthew Rock, you must admit, was a peculiar man."

"Deuced peculiar, with all due respect to his memory, now that he is dead. He was the most peculiar man I think I ever met, and I have run across some odd ones."

"For reasons which I may not explain, Mr. Rock believed it to be his duty to leave all of his property to me."

"Then I must congratulate you, Harry Dane," said the foreman of the derrick gang, heartily, "for it's my opinion you have come into possession of a fortune."

"You mean in case oil is struck on this place."

"That's exactly what I do mean, and I may tell you that the prospects of a flow of oil are exceedingly bright. I mentioned before that we had struck oil-bearing rock. To-morrow will prove that the oil is there, or all signs will go for nothing. In what direction this streak of oil runs, or how wide it is, we have not yet been able to determine. We have made several borings without result, and I was beginning to believe the old man was off on the subject, when we made the strike of the rock here. By following up this lead we ought in time uncover a round dozen or more first-class gushers."

"You really believe, then, that there is oil under this farm, Mr. Brackett?" asked Dane, with unaffected eagerness.

"I certainly do, now. And when we shake the bottom of this well up to-morrow I expect to see my opinion satisfactorily proven."

"At that rate it is lucky that Matthew Rock built that big tank which I see the men are finishing."

"Most lucky."

"How much will it hold?"

"About five hundred barrels."

Phil listened in some astonishment to the conversation between his chum and the foreman of the derrick gang.

Until that moment he really had had but little faith that oil would actually be found on the Wakeley farm.

Now he realized that within twenty-four hours the county was likely to be startled by wonderful news that would set more than one farmer in a fever of hope that the oil tract might run underneath his own property, too.

Harry Dane explained to Dan Brackett that, as he was under age, all business arrangements would have to be completed through his mother, who had been named executrix of the will, which would be filed in the Prescott County Court after the funeral of Matthew Rock.

"As her representative, whatever orders I give you will go," said Harry.

"Certainly; I understand that," replied the foreman, respectfully.

After some further conversation Harry and his friend departed, both of them assuring Brackett that they would be on hand the following afternoon to witness the shooting of the well, provided the expert arrived.

Accordingly, after dinner on the ensuing day Harry and Phil put in an appearance at the Wakeley farm, where they were met by Dan Brackett, who informed the new owner of the property that the "shooter" had arrived and was preparing to undertake his hazardous job.

As the foreman and the two boys were making their way to the pasture where the unsightly derrick stood, marking the site of the boring, they saw the expert himself walking gingerly across the fields, bearing in either hand a tin can of the explosive fluid.

"It wouldn't be me that would carry that stuff across that field—not on your tintage!" said Phil, watching the daring "shooter" with an anxious eye. "Supposing he was to trip over a rock?"

"If the stuff exploded I'm afraid he'd vanish in a cloud of smoke and flame, and we wouldn't recover enough pieces to make a respectable funeral," replied Brackett.

"The man must have a wonderful nerve," remarked Harry, following the man's retreating figure with undisguised admiration.

"He gets paid in proportion to the risk he assumes," said the foreman.

"Excuse me," replied Phil. "I wouldn't take his chances for all the oil there may be under this farm."

"It is undoubtedly a risky means of livelihood," replied Brackett, "but he's used to it. Just the same, you notice he isn't taking any chances."

After depositing his dangerous burdens close to the derrick the shooter made a second trip across the fields, bearing long coils of rope and two glistening tin tubes, together with a heavy pointed cylinder of iron.

The workmen as well as the sightseers held aloof at a respectable distance from the derrick, which had been stripped of every movable object, such as planks, tools and the like, all of which had been taken away and stored in one of the sheds.

"What is the man doing now?" asked Phil of his chum,

who was watching the expert through a pair of powerful field glasses.

"He is arranging one of the shining tubes in a safe position to receive its charge of nitroglycerine."

"Gracious! I'm beginning to get nervous," said Deering, gripping the top of the snake fence, behind which they stood, looking down the gentle declivity toward the scene of action.

"Now he's lifting one of the cans of explosive stuff," reported Harry, with his eyes glued to the field-glass. "He's uncorking the can, resting it upon his bent knee, and holding it as tight as though it were a golden nugget he had just picked out of the earth."

"It's pretty ticklish business, bet your life," replied Phil.

"Now he's inserting a funnel in the torpedo opening," continued Harry, in a tone that quivered a little with excitement. "Now he tips the can to allow the thick, yellowish stuff to flow down into the torpedo tube."

"Let me have a look," palpitated Phil.

Harry resigned the glass to him in time for him to see the expert fill the second tube without accident.

"Say, the fellow is wiping the sides of the tubes with his pocket handkerchief. He seems to be awful careful about it, too. What is he doing that for?" asked Phil.

"It won't do to leave the least atom of moisture on them that might be nitroglycerine," said Brackett, who rejoined them at that moment.

"The friction in lowering the tubes down the iron tube of the well might lead to a premature explosion if he were not very careful in seeing they were clear of even a suspicion of the explosive."

"He's lowering the tubes down now with his ropes."

"The worst of his peril will be over in a moment or two, then," replied Brackett.

"I'm glad of it," said Harry, fervently.

"The fellow is mighty thankful himself, too, in spite of his dare-devil way of carrying himself," said the foreman.

"I'll bet he is," agreed Phil, with a sickly sort of grin.

"Now he's got hold of that pointed iron cylinder," said Harry, who had taken the glasses again. "That's what he drops down the tube on top of the nitroglycerine to set it off, isn't it, Mr. Brackett?"

"Yes. You'll hear and feel the explosion in a minute. Just watch when he starts to run away from the derrick and then you'll know it's coming."

"There he goes," cried Phil, in great excitement.

Suddenly the ground beneath their feet was shaken by a dull, heavy explosion, evidently in the very bowels of the earth.

"Wow!" yelled Deering, holding on to the fence, while the field before him seemed to rise and fall perceptibly, as if convulsed by an earthquake.

The expert lost his footing and went sprawling on the ground, but he was up again in a twinkling.

There was a watery grumbling beneath them, followed by a sullen roar, and then a thick column of dark liquid, of a brownish hue, verging on black, rushed upward through the well tube, spreading out a short distance above

the mouth of the pipe until it enveloped the entire upper half of the derrick, totally obscuring it, and rising far above the top of the structure, to fall back upon itself, churned into an oily spray iridescent with changing hues of green and amber.

In a moment the land for many yards around the derrick was flooded with crude petroleum.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Harry Dane, almost wild with delight, as he realized the true significance of that spouting liquid. "I have indeed struck oil!"

CHAPTER VI.

DISPOSING OF THE CRUDE OIL.

PHIL DEERING stood in open-mouthed wonder, watching the crude petroleum shooting skyward.

It was certainly a great sight.

The derrick gang, under the direction of Dan Brackett, were preparing to get the oil under control and pipe it to the big tank, to which the builders were then putting the finishing touches.

"This is great, isn't it, Phil?" remarked Harry, at length.

"Bet your life it is," was the answer.

"Have you seen enough? I must rush home and carry the news to mother," said Dane.

"And it's me to my old man as fast as I can go," grinned Phil. "Won't he stare when I tell him! He said this morning it was all bosh to think oil would be found in this county."

"Your father said that, did he?"

"He did."

"He'll have to alter his opinion now," laughed Harry.

"I'll bet he will. That's a good one I've got on him."

The boys parted at an adjacent lane.

The intelligence of the discovery of petroleum on the Wakeley farm was all over the neighborhood in a few hours, and a regular pilgrimage of curious people set in toward the scene of the oil operations.

The owners of farms in the immediate neighborhood were greatly excited, and talked about probing their own property in search of the desirable fluid.

There was a large gathering on the following day at the funeral of Matthew Rock, which was conducted from the village church.

Mrs. Dane had purchased a small grave plot in the pleasantest part of the rural cemetery, and had spared no reasonable expense in paying every respect to the memory of the eccentric man who had made restitution to the family at the eleventh hour.

The facts of the wrong he had done the late George Dane were kept a profound secret from the public, and he went to his rest without an apparent stain on his character.

Everybody, however, was anxious to learn just why the old hermit had selected Harry Dane as his heir, but the

boy and his mother, as well as Phil Deering and Dr. Billings, had nothing to say on the subject; and so the general curiosity on the subject remained unsatisfied, although all sorts of surmises obtained circulation throughout the neighborhood.

Next day Mrs. Dane called on the village lawyer and put the will in his hands for probate in the neighboring town of Prescott.

She and Harry also held a lengthy consultation with him on the subject of the petroleum discovery at the Wakeley farm, and asked his professional advice as to the method of making the best use of their good fortune.

Lawyer Hale was an old friend of the Danes, and mother and son knew they could thoroughly depend upon whatever suggestions he offered.

"Your son, Mrs. Dane, seems to have a considerable fortune in sight. By the time he will have reached his majority he ought to be a wealthy young man."

"It's better to be born lucky than rich, isn't it, Mr. Hale?" grinned Harry, who was a favorite not only with the lawyer, but also with his pretty daughter, Eloise, on whom he frequently found an excuse to call.

The legal gentleman smiled good-naturedly.

"There is something in that, I dare say. Now, in reference to this oil—let me know how matters stand on the Wakeley farm at this moment."

Harry described, as far as he knew, the present condition of affairs at the farm.

"I will see Dan Brackett this afternoon and get a detailed account from him of the history of Matthew Rock's endeavors to discover this oil, together with a full statement of all expenses incurred to date, paid and unpaid."

"That's right. But Mr. Rock must have kept some record of the cost of this work. You haven't searched his cabin, have you, for any books or papers that belonged to him?"

"Not yet, sir. I locked the house up after we removed the body, on the morning following his death, and have not been near it since."

"I should advise you to go there at once and take possession of all his personal property and turn it over to your mother."

"I will do so, sir."

"You say that you have found the money that Mr. Rock told you he had buried at a certain spot in the marsh?"

"Yes, sir. Phil Deering was with me when I dug it up, and Mrs. Boothby was present when I opened the japanned box and found a package of bills, which I afterward counted and found to amount to a little over six thousand dollars."

"Which you handed to your mother, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"It was fortunate you got this money, as you will certainly need it, or a portion of it, at any rate, to straighten things up at the Wakeley farm. You are exceptionally lucky in having a completed tank of five hundred barrels' capacity to store the first of your oil. I suppose you have not considered the question as to whether you'll make ar-

rangements to sell the crude material to a refinery as it comes from the earth, or whether you will consider an outside proposition to dispose of or lease your rights to the product of the property?"

"No, sir. But I am in favor of working the oil off myself."

"How do you propose to do this?"

"By shipping it in barrels to the Independent refinery at Liberty, on the Mississippi River."

"Have you any idea of what it will cost you to produce this oil ready for shipment?"

"I have not figured on it, sir. It is rather an expensive way of getting it to the refinery, I believe, but I don't see any other way of doing it, under present circumstances. Other methods, such as laying down a track from the farm to Prescott and running tank cars direct to the property, or piping it to the railroad at Prescott, are hardly to be considered at this stage of the game, when we have only one gusher at work. The large oil companies in Delaware County, with their thirty or forty odd producing wells, have laid down pipes and connected with the Indiana Pipe Line Company, one of the subsidiary companies of the Oil Trust—that is, most of them have. Dan Brackett says their average cost of production per barrel, piped, is eight cents, and they receive eighty-three cents for the same, which represents a pretty big profit."

"I should think so," replied Mr. Hale.

"The price of Indiana oil has been as high as one dollar and thirty-one cents a barrel, and I saw it stated in the papers that old oil men assert it will go to that figure again. Some believe it will even go beyond that and reach one dollar and fifty cents within a few months."

"I advise you to continue drilling and testing the property under Brackett's direction," said the lawyer. "I have heard that he is thoroughly experienced at the business. I will have an interview with him myself in a day or two, and perhaps between us we can shape the policy of this new oil field."

The discovery of petroleum in Blank County was soon heralded throughout the State, and quite a number of strangers visited the Wakeley farm and made pertinent inquiries on the subject.

Mrs. Dane received two or three offers to lease the property from mysterious individuals who declined to tell whom they represented, and one foxy-looking person, after going over the farm and pumping Dan Brackett to some purpose, wanted to buy the place outright.

All of these people were referred to Lawyer Hale, and he declined to consider any of the propositions submitted.

Harry Dane, as general manager of the new industry, made arrangements to furnish the crude oil to the Independent refinery at Liberty.

He had a large number of barrels shipped to Prescott, and these were duly carried out to the farm.

The barrels were filled, sent to Prescott by wagon and dispatched by rail to Liberty.

There seemed to be no difficulty about transportation,

and, while this method greatly reduced profits, it was, on the whole, fairly satisfactory under existing conditions.

In the meantime Dan Brackett kept a gang at work drilling in a new place, and the indications promised a second successful gusher.

Lawyer Hale decided that the prospects warranted the outlay of a portion of the six thousand dollars in the erection of a second five-hundred-barrel tank, and work upon it was immediately begun.

Thus several weeks passed away.

Considerable activity was, during this time, observed on many of the neighboring farms, their owners having obtained the services of experienced men to test and in many instances drill the ground for oil-bearing rock.

This work received renewed impetus when a second well was successfully shot on the Wakeley farm, and the product of Harry Dane's property rose to over seven hundred barrels per month.

There was a creek which came within half a mile of the farm, flowing past the village and afterward emptying into the Mississinewa River.

This creek had its rise in the swamp land, on the border of which Matthew Rock had lived for so many years, and it skirted a portion of the Deering farm.

Harry Dane and his friend Phil were walking along its banks late one Sunday afternoon, when an idea suddenly occurred to Harry.

"Do you know, Phil, I'd like to arrange with your father to build a small wharf somewhere along here."

"What for?" asked Phil, in some surprise.

"To ship my oil by water to Liberty, down the Mississinewa. It should be ever so much cheaper than carting the barrels away over to the railroad at Prescott, as we're doing now. I'm obliged to pay a pretty stiff rate for transportation of the oil, and also for the return of the empties, not to speak about the time and labor in carrying the barrels to and from the station."

"That isn't a bad idea," replied his chum.

"I could charter a sloop to make regular trips to and from Liberty. We have now over seven hundred barrels a month, and we are drilling a third well, so the prospect of one thousand barrels a month is pretty bright."

"And you're getting eighty-three cents a barrel for your oil?"

"Yes; but I understand that the price will be advanced by the trust next month."

"So much the better for you."

"I should say so. This discovery of oil up here is going to prove a godsend to the Independent refinery at Liberty."

"How is that?"

"The owners of the refinery say they are beginning to experience some difficulty in getting the crude oil to refine."

"Haven't they a large supply in Delaware County to draw from?"

"They did have, but the trust is rapidly cutting down this supply."

"How?"

"By securing control of the greater part of the Delaware County output."

"Is that so?"

"Sure thing. All the big producing companies are now connected by a complete pipe line system with the Indiana Pipe Line Company—that's a branch of the trust—and in that way dispose of their entire product at the cheapest possible rate."

"My father said there was a movement on foot among the independent producers to pipe their oil independent of the trust."

"I heard so, too; but it will take a great deal of money to carry it through. The Liberty people informed me that, while there are enough independent producers outside of the pipe system, and who rely upon tank cars for transporting their oil, they find it almost impossible to get the railroad to furnish half enough cars. The result is, they can only get a portion of their stuff to Liberty, and therefore are gradually surrendering to the trust."

"I see."

"Now, as my oil is fast becoming an object of importance, I am anxious to get out of the clutch of the railroad company before they begin to turn the screws on me."

"You've got a great head, Harry. It is the part of a wise general to be prepared for all emergencies."

"That's the way I think."

"Have you ever been approached by the agents of the trust?"

"Twice, I think."

"You think! Don't you know?"

"No. The other day Mr. Hale, our lawyer, had an offer from a trust agent for the oil under our property, but it was so ridiculously small that he promptly turned it down. The man afterward came out to the farm and snooped around some, had a talk with Dan Brackett, dropped sundry hints that we'd find it greatly to our advantage to sell out to the trust, and intimated that if we refused we might greatly regret it."

"Do you think the trust controls the railroad through the county?"

"I'll bet it does. And I'll bet the rate is going to be raised on us to Liberty, too. That's why I want to provide an outlet for my oil by way of the creek and the Mississinewa River. I can then snap my finger at the railroad, and the trust, too, for that matter."

CHAPTER VII.

REAL AMERICAN GRIT.

HARRY DANE went home with Phil and had supper at his house that night.

Then he broached the subject of the wharf to Mr. Deering.

Phil's father was not adverse to accommodating the

bright boy, and thought the idea of an outlet for his oil by water was a first-class plan.

"I am bound to say, Harry," he remarked, "that I do not sympathize with the methods of the Oil Trust. The big combine is altogether too rapacious. It wants the whole hog, and practically tells the independent people to get off the earth."

"It surely looks that way. The trust is undoubtedly trying to force the concern at Liberty out of business."

"That's right. And you will find, as soon as you open a few more wells, that pressure will be brought to bear on you to sell out, or, at least, dispose of your output to the trust. Should you enter into such an agreement, I'll wager you will be able to have a track laid right down to the farm, and you will get all the tank cars you need."

"I have no doubt but that is what I should have to expect if I didn't have the creek to fall back on. The Independent refinery at Liberty is only too glad to take all the oil I can send it, and I guess it'll get it in spite of the trust."

"Apparently so, but don't lose sight of the fact that the opposition people are not asleep. They'll devise some means of euchring you when your output becomes of sufficient importance to attract their special attention."

"Oh, I am not afraid of them as long as the Independent refinery keeps going."

"But can you even guess how long the Liberty concern will continue in business?"

"Why, I don't believe they have any idea of stopping," replied Harry, somewhat startled at this.

"You can't tell. The conditions which confront that establishment at present are in no respect different from those which are being met by other refiners in different parts of the State, as well as in Pennsylvania and elsewhere. Many refineries have been compelled to shut down for lack of crude petroleum, while others have sold out to the trust or are on the point of doing so. The independent producer is up against a pretty stiff proposition these days. The only hope I see for them is in combining, where there are a number in a district, and then controlling a refinery for themselves. Even then they will find that the railroads will put up transportation rates on the finished article. The trust can get rebates, owing to its enormous business and control of the stock in the various roads, that are refused to outside parties."

"Well, I suppose I can count on you allowing me the privilege of building a wharf on your property, on this side of the creek, and that I can have the right of way through your farm for my oil barrels?"

"You can. I will be glad to help you beat the opposition in any way that lies in my power."

"Thank you, Mr. Deering."

A couple of weeks later a third productive well was shot successfully on the Wakeley property and a third tank built to accommodate the flow.

This raised the output of Harry Dane's crude oil industry to over one thousand barrels a month, all of which was now being shipped by water to Liberty.

The Independent refinery had contracted to take the entire supply, and as much more as the Wakeley interests could furnish.

About this time oil was found on the property next to the Wakeley farm.

The fortunate owner was a middle-aged farmer named Bennett.

As soon as Harry heard about it he rushed over to see him.

"I see you have joined the ranks of the lucky ones," he said to Mr. Bennett.

"I'm glad to say that it looks that way," replied the happy agriculturist.

"Well, as soon as you are ready to ship, you want to send it by water to the Independent refinery at Liberty. They'll take all you have to sell at the highest market rate. The price, by the way, has just been advanced to ninety-one cents a barrel."

"So I saw by the papers. You have three wells producing now, haven't you?"

"I have, and two more under way."

"You're going into the thing wholesale, aren't you, young man?"

"I'm going to get all there's to be got out of it."

"That's right. So am I, only I'm a bit pressed for cash."

"I hope you won't sell out to the trust people."

"Not if I can help it."

"I want you to show a stiff front. I've been talking the matter up among those who are prospecting for oil-producing rock on their property. I find they're all willing, in case they strike oil, to combine against the extortion of the trust. I think we can depend on the Independent refinery. In fact, I'm sure we can, if we can furnish them with enough of crude oil to keep their works in operation."

"Well, I'm with you," replied Mr. Bennett, with apparent earnestness.

Harry was satisfied that the new producer meant well, and intended to leave no stone unturned to keep him in line.

That same week another well was shot with success on another adjacent farm, and the oil industry began to take on a blooming look in Blank County.

About this time the foxy-looking individual appeared again and made another attempt to buy off the Dane interests, but failed, of course.

Before he left, however, he intimated that the Dane family might regret having turned him down.

Harry was perfectly satisfied that if the oil product of the neighborhood was concentrated on Liberty they could keep well to the windward of the trust.

With the beginning of Indian summer a fourth well came into operation on the Wakeley property, and several new ones began to spout on the adjacent properties.

Harry took on himself the management of the transportation end, leaving the producing end to Dan Brackett, who had been advanced to assistant general manager, at a satisfactory salary.

One morning, soon after the fourth well began to get down to business, Harry received a letter from the general freight agent of the D. G. & M. Railroad, the line which passed by Prescott and connected with a big trunk line running into Indianapolis, with an outlet to all points north, south, east and west.

The communication intimated that the company was prepared to submit a proposal looking to the carriage by rail of the entire output of the Wakeley petroleum product as far as Megrim, a town where the trust had a big refinery in operation.

The company agreed to build a track to the property and furnish all the necessary tank cars for the transportation of the oil at such a figure per car for a specified length of time.

Harry laughed and carried the letter to Lawyer Hale.

After a consultation with the young manager, the legal gentleman notified the railroad company that the Dane oil would, for the present, at least, continue to be forwarded to the Independent refinery at Liberty by water, as a year's charter had been entered into with the owner of the two sloops engaged in the transportation.

"The trust is evidently at the back of this offer from the railroad company," said Harry. "I guess your letter will provide them with food for reflection."

"I dare say," nodded Mr. Hale. "But don't forget that you have now put yourself squarely on record against the trust, and you must be prepared to hear from them in some way. Eternal vigilance hereafter will be the price you must pay for independence. Beware of some artful trick. Look out that your transportation man is not tampered with."

"I have a regular contract with him."

"Don't trust too much to that."

"He's making money out of us, with prospects of more in the near future. He'd be a fool to go back on a good thing."

"The trust people may find it to their interests to buy him off."

"Then I'll start a new transportation line myself," said Harry, resolutely.

"The opposition may be able to head you off."

"How can it?"

"By putting a spoke in your efforts to charter suitable vessels."

"They'll have to get up mighty early in the morning if they expect to do me. I'm in this fight to win."

Lawyer Hale looked at the young man admiringly.

"I like your pluck, Harry. You've got the real American grit; but, remember, it is American craft and perseverance you're up against. In a diamond-cut-diamond contest the biggest man wins, and you know who the biggest man is in this case."

"Well, you'll find I won't disgrace the name of Dane," said the boy, defiantly. "I'm opposed to all kinds of trusts, if you want to know my sentiments, and the Oil Trust in particular at present."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE THREE PLOTTERS.

A THIRD sloop was added to the transportation fleet that carried the oil from the wharf on the Deering property to Liberty.

This was made necessary by the amount of petroleum which Harry Dane arranged for shipment from the outside producers, of which there were now four in the neighborhood.

He was making a strong effort to keep these people in line as independents, but all of them were more or less handicapped by lack of money, and had to depend solely on the money they now received for the crude material.

Although the smart, progressive boy was opposed to trusts in general, he was in favor of a community of interests—that is, a combination of the independent producers for the purpose of marketing their product on the most favorable lines.

It was getting on toward the end of fall, and a fifth well was in working order on the Wakeley farm, when the Danes heard from an emissary of the Oil Trust again.

Apparently the Dane interests were recognized as the controlling force in the oil industry in Blank County, for Lawyer Hale, their legal representative, was approached with a proposition, the object of which was the formation of a single company, in which it was proposed to merge all the producers of the district, under exceptionally favorable conditions. The Indiana Pipe Line Company was ready to lay a pipe line right into the heart of the oil region of Blank County and contract for the entire supply, present and future, at ninety-one cents a barrel.

It was an enticing proposal on its face.

Harry, however, refused to consider it, and a polite negative was forwarded to the party who had submitted the matter.

The scheme, however, gave Harry Dane an idea, which he proposed to follow up in his own way.

About three weeks later Harry, returning from the boat landing in the creek to his home, in the dusk of the evening, noticed three disreputable-looking men slouching along through the bushes ahead of him.

Their actions were so suspicious that the boy kept his eye upon them.

Somehow or another he had an idea he had seen these men before.

"I wonder where those rascals are going?" he mused. "They seem to be headed for our farm. I don't like the idea of having three such vicious-looking chaps hanging around our premises, for they are certainly up to no good."

He kept their figures in view as well as he could in the gathering darkness, determined to find out whether or not their intentions were hostile to his interests.

They climbed the fence where Mr. Deering's farm joined his mother's place and slunk along beside it, without making any effort to go toward the Dane farmhouse.

Harry was relieved to find that the men were not making toward his home, but all the same he decided to follow them up until he saw they had actually left the limits of his land.

The course they were pursuing, however, was certain to bring them eventually to the Wakeley farm, which joined the Dane property on the west.

Harry wondered if their real object was a short cut toward the nearest county road.

This hardly seemed possible, as the road could be reached in a more direct way.

At last they reached the fence between the Dane and Wakeley farms, climbed over and made direct for the tall, gaunt derrick which marked the location of oil well No. 5—the one which had but recently been shot.

On one side of the unsightly pile was a small house, in which Dan Brackett had taken up his residence, with his sister for housekeeper; on the other ran a low stone wall for some distance.

Close to this wall a shed had been erected to store the drilling tools, rope, lumber and other material used in the late boring.

The three men gave the derrick a wide berth, stepped over the wall and walked toward the shed.

They paused in front of the wide opening, looked in and conversed together in tones that did not reach as far as the boy's ears.

Finally they disappeared around the corner of the shed.

Harry, following close upon their heels, soon heard the sound of their voices quite plainly, and he knew they had halted on the far side of the shed, near the low wall.

He crept up to the corner of the shed, which he could safely do without attracting their attention, as the glow was rapidly fading out of the sky, and saw that they evidently intended to roost at that point for a while, at least, for one of their number was gathering sticks and dry twigs into a heap, with the purpose of starting a fire, for the night was decidedly cool.

A match was applied to the dry tinder and the tiny flame fanned into a blaze.

More wood was added, until quite a respectable fire resulted, about which the three men gathered under the shadow of the shed and warmed themselves.

Presently they produced some sandwiches and began to eat, and during and following this performance a suspicious-looking black flask circulated among them, at which each took a long swig with great relish.

Harry now had a good opportunity to study their hard-looking faces in the flickering glow of the fire, and the longer he looked the more certain he was that he had seen them before.

All at once he remembered where and under what circumstances he had previously run across them.

These were the three men who had assaulted and caused the death of Matthew Rock in the swamp during the storm and darkness, when he and Phil Deering were trying to escape from their dangerous and unpleasant predicament.

And he and Phil had subsequently seen them through

the cabin window turning things upside down in the house in their fruitless search for the old hermit's money.

"So, those scoundrels are back again in this neighborhood," breathed Harry. "It would give me lots of satisfaction to catch and put them into the county jail. I'd try to make it hot for them for their murderous assault on Matthew Rock."

The rascals were holding a powwow about something, and Harry listened to their conversation.

"We kin begin operations at this here shed and that derrick yonder. These oil-soaked barrels around it ought to help the good work along. At any rate, we'll have no diffikilty puttin' this well out of commission," and the fellow laughed wickedly.

"Well, thet's what we're paid to do, ain't it?" said the rascal on his right, with an ugly grin.

"We air thet," chipped in the third man, rubbing his dirty hands over the blaze.

"There are five wells, several sheds and three big tanks. Ef we kin handle 'em all afore we're headed off, it'll put a wad of money inter our pockets."

"We oughter be able to do enough damage to put this here ile industry out of business for a while."

"We kin do thet sure," said one of his companions, wagging his head confidently.

"I reckon thet must be the object of the chap what hired us to do this job."

"I wonder what's behind his little game?" said the rufian who was warming his hands.

"I'll never tell yer," replied the fellow who seemed to be the leader of the group. "What's more, I don't care. I'm out for the dough. That's all I'm looking for."

"We didn't get much for the trouble we took of laying out thet old hermit, as they called him, some months ago. People said he had money concealed about his cabin, but it was a false alarm. He warn't no better off than we were ourselves."

"We put him out of his misery, at any rate," said the leader, with brutal frankness.

"I dunno as I'm stuck on killin' people for nothin'. It's altogether too resky."

"There's consid'able risk about this thing, too. There's a gang of men housed down yonder. We mustn't let 'em catch on to us, after the first blaze gits started, or we'll have to make tracks at a pretty lively rate."

"Well, when shall we begin?" asked one of the men, impatiently.

"Pretty soon now. Just as soon as it gits good and dark."

Harry Dane had heard enough to convince him that the fellows gathered about the fire were plotting to destroy the derrick, the tanks, sheds and other property on the place.

And they were about to do this at the bidding of some unknown person who had promised them good pay for the dastardly work.

Who could this person be?

Harry could not guess his identity, but it was clear he was a most determined enemy.

"Could it be an agent of the trust?" Harry asked himself. "Surely those people would not countenance such a crime even to win a point in their own favor?"

There was no use wasting time figuring upon who was at the back of the rascally enterprise.

The thing now was to head these villains off and, if possible, capture them.

"I must rouse out Brackett and some of the men without a moment's delay, and I must do it so as not to frighten off the scoundrels, for they'd only come back at another time."

Thus figured Harry Dane, as he softly withdrew, ran back along the stone wall a short distance, and then, leaping it near the derrick, he made for the house where he expected to find his assistant manager probably eating his supper.

He approached the building from the rear and knocked on the kitchen door.

It was opened by Brackett himself.

"That you, Harry Dane?" exclaimed Dan, in some surprise.

"Come out here, Mr. Brackett. I want to see you on a matter of grave importance," answered Harry, in a voice which betrayed subdued excitement.

The assistant manager got his hat and then rejoined his young employer.

CHAPTER IX.

CAPTURE OF THE THREE RASCALS.

"WELL, Harry," said Dan Brackett, "what's the trouble?"

"There's a scheme on foot to destroy the machinery, oil tanks and other property on this place," replied the boy.

"No!" exclaimed the assistant manager, in astonishment.

"Yes. I just overheard the plans of the rascals. They are hiding behind that stone wall over yonder, near the shed," said Harry, pointing around the corner of the house. "They have built a small fire there to warm themselves while they are waiting for darkness to cover their movements. Don't you see the faint reflection of it against the side of the shed?"

Brackett admitted that he did.

"Those three scoundrels——"

"There are three of them, then?"

"Yes. They are the very miscreants who are responsible for the death of Matthew Rock the night Phil Deering and myself found him dying at the foot of the scarred oak, a few yards from his cabin."

"And you heard them plotting to destroy our oil outfit?"

"I did."

"Why, what possible good would that do them?"

"They have been hired by some enemy of ours to do us up."

"And who is this enemy?"

"I didn't learn that."

"That's unfortunate, if these fellows are really the tools of another. Well, we must try to catch these rascals before they do any damage to the property."

"You'll have to get some of the laborers to help us. Have several of our men cut off their retreat, while we take them in the front."

"That's a good idea. You'd better keep an eye on their movements from here while I go for assistance."

"Don't lose any time, Mr. Brackett. It's getting dark fast, and they're liable to get busy any moment."

"Oh, I'll be spry about it. We'll make an example of these chaps. It may deter others from engaging in a similar enterprise. Whoever put them up to it is the party I'd like to catch most of all."

"We must try to compel these men to confess after we get hold of them."

"We'll turn the screws on them. Well, I'm off," and Brackett hurried off into the gloom at the back of his house.

Harry kept his eyes upon the stone wall near the shanty, expecting any moment to see the three rascals appear over it.

Once or twice he dimly made out a head and a pair of broad shoulders rise above the wall, as if their owner was taking a survey of the surroundings to see that the coast continued clear.

In less than ten minutes Brackett returned with half a dozen of the laborers employed on the place.

Harry explained to them the exact position of the villains, and Brackett told them to make their way to the rear, so as to head them off when he and the young manager descended upon them from the front.

The men started off to carry out their directions.

"I'm going into the house for my revolver," said Dan, after they had disappeared in the gloom.

He was gone about three minutes.

"We'll give our men ten minutes to get into position and then we'll get busy," he said when he rejoined the boy.

"Those chaps are preparing for action now," said Harry, pointing toward the shed.

Brackett looked and saw the reflection of three figures in the firelight.

They were standing up and moving about.

"We'll have to make a move, or they'll be over the wall before we know it, and that will disarrange our plan for their capture."

"Have you got a stick of some kind around here I can use as a club?" asked the boy.

"I've the very thing you want."

Brackett went into the kitchen and presently returned with a smooth piece of wood with a knot at the end of it.

"That will do some execution," he remarked, with a laugh, "if it comes in contact with a man's head and shoulders."

They left the shelter of the dwelling and cautiously ad-

vanced across the open space toward the stone wall. The rascals acted as if they did not fear interference.

Apparently they counted on having things their own way, owing to the lonesomeness of the surroundings and the absence of a regular watchman.

At the present moment they appeared to be in consultation about the matter in hand.

The absence of haste on their part enabled Harry and Dan Brackett to draw quite near to the spot where they stood.

The young manager and his stalwart assistant took shelter in the shadow of an oak tree which grew close to the wall.

From this point of vantage they watched the deliberate actions of the three ruffians.

The whiskey flask made its final round of the three mouths, the last man tossing the empty bottle into the bushes.

Then the fellows showed by unmistakable signs that they were ready to begin business.

"Now is our time," said Brackett, nudging the boy.

"Got your gun ready?" asked Harry, gripping his weapon tighter.

"I have."

"Come on, then."

Dane sprang upon the low stone wall, brandishing his stout cudgel, and, closely followed by Brackett, made a dash at the plotters.

Though taken by surprise, one of the rascals snatched a stick from the fire and stood on the defensive.

The other two stood for a moment undecided, and then turned to flee as Harry rushed at them with his club.

Brackett had covered the more resolute fellow with his revolver and called on him to surrender.

He seemed inclined to put up a fight, but he finally yielded when he realized that he stood no show.

His companions had scattered in their attempt to escape, but this did not avail them, for Harry's cudgel stretched one upon the ground at the very moment the other was surrounded and taken prisoner by the men advancing from the rear.

The three villains were speedily bound.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourselves?" asked Brackett, sternly, looking at the fellow who appeared to be the leader.

The rascal made no reply, merely staring insolently at the assistant manager.

"You came here to destroy our property, you scoundrel," said Brackett.

"Who says so?" retorted the man, with an ugly look.

"I say so."

"You'll have to prove that."

"I guess we can do that."

"You can't."

"Let me tell you that you three were followed to this place, that your conversation and plotting were overheard."

"It's a lie!"

"Very well. I'm going to take you all to the village lock-up, and to-morrow you'll have the opportunity to defend yourselves before the justice."

"You'll pay for this pretty dearly," gritted the rascal.

"I guess you'll find the boot is on the other leg, my fine fellow," answered Brackett, significantly.

"You can't prove nothin'," snarled the man, with a smothered oath.

"Your project was to destroy the property on this farm—the derrick, oil tanks and other valuable material. Now, you fellows wouldn't attempt such a risky business out of mere wantonness. Somebody employed you to do it—somebody who has an object in destroying this business. Tell us who this man is—make a clean breast of the whole conspiracy—and we'll make things easy for you. Otherwise——"

"Well?" sneered the rascal.

"We'll make it so hot for you that you'll wish you'd never gone into the scheme."

"You can't do a blame thing. We was only jest warmin' ourselves by the fire. You can't show that we've touched anythin' belongin' to this place."

"We can show more than you think."

"Bah! You're talkin' through your hat. We ain't afeard of you. Take us to the lock-up. We don't keer. There hain't no evidence ag'in us, and yer know it."

"Are you going to confess who put you on to this job?"

"Nobody put us onto nothin'."

"All right," replied Brackett, secretly annoyed by the rascal's bold front, for he began to realize that he and Harry Dane had been too precipitate in capturing the villains—that it would have been better policy to have permitted them to show their hands and then have taken them red-handed. "Fetch them along, boys."

A horse was harnessed to a light wagon, the three ruffians were put in, and, with a couple of the hands to guard them and Harry and Brackett on the seat, they drove off to the village.

Routing out the constable, Harry made a formal charge of contemplated incendiarism against the fellows, and they were locked up for the night.

CHAPTER X.

EXPANDING BUSINESS.

WHEN the village constable went to the lock-up on the following morning to supply his three prisoners with something to eat, an hour before he expected to take them before the justice for examination, he found something had occurred during the night.

There was a hole in the roof of the rural prison pen and the prisoners were missing.

This was the extremely annoying disclosure the constable

made to the justice at his office, in the presence of Harry Dane, Dan Brackett, Lawyer Hale, Phil Deering and others drawn there by the report of the capture.

"You say the men escaped by way of a hole in the roof, Constable Jones?" asked the justice, with magisterial sternness.

"Yes, your honor."

"How came that hole to be in the roof?"

"The fellows made it, your honor."

"Was the roof broken in any way before they were put into the place?"

"I never noticed that it was."

"It's your business to see that there are no loopholes for your prisoners to take advantage of. They must have had some tools to force their way out that way. Did you search the prisoners before you left them?"

"No, your honor," sheepishly admitted the constable.

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't think it necessary."

"Well, you see what has resulted from your negligence. Those fellows evidently had implements on their persons which, when left alone, they turned to good use. You are responsible for their escape, constable, and your carelessness is deserving of censure. You had better make some effort to recapture your late prisoners."

The constable hurriedly left the justice's office.

"It is too bad they got away," spoke up Harry Dane.

"Those men are wanted for murder—they caused the death of Matthew Rock—as well as for the incendiary job they were about to put into effect on our place when we caught them. They look like a desperate bad lot, capable of any crime, and I expect we shall have more trouble with them in the near future."

"I regret as much as you do that the rascals managed to escape owing to the shortsightedness of Constable Jones," replied Justice Cox. "But the damage is done and we'll have to make the best of the unfortunate circumstance. You had better establish a strict watch on your property after this."

"That's what we mean to do," said Dan Brackett. "We have been somewhat careless in that respect heretofore, as we did not apprehend being disturbed by any outside influence directed against our works."

"What could be the object of these rascals in trying to destroy your property?" asked the justice, with some curiosity.

"I have strong reason for believing that they were employed by some person unknown to us to damage our oil business," said Harry Dane, without hesitation.

"This is a serious assertion, young man. Are you sure you have good ground for such suspicion?" asked the justice, in surprise.

"I overheard the fellows mention that fact among themselves."

"You didn't get a clew to the identity of the supposed principal in the plot, did you?"

"No, not the slightest."

"Do you suspect any one?"

"I do not. The only business rivals we have would hardly stoop to, or even wink at, such a contemptible and criminal scheme."

There was considerable surmise among the spectators present as to who was at the back of the outrage, but there was nothing on which to base a tangible theory.

The justice adjourned the proceedings, and those present departed their various ways, hoping for further developments in the case.

"What do you think about it, Harry?" asked Phil, as he and his chum took their seats in the wagon driven by Dan Brackett, and the trio set out for the Wakeley farm.

"I don't know what to think," replied his friend. "The only business enemy we have that I know of is the trust, and it seems preposterous to suspect any agent of theirs would dare take such desperate chances to injure our plant."

"I agree with you there. The trust, bad as are its methods, does not resort to crime to further its plans. If one of its agents is really at the back of this attempt to destroy your property, he is working, I guess, entirely on his own responsibility."

"We should make it mighty unpleasant for such a party if we caught him at such a game."

"I rather think you would. By the way, father told me this morning he gave you permission to lay a light track through our property to the wharf, as you intend to transport your oil on cars instead of by wagons."

"That's correct. I have ordered a small narrow-gauge locomotive and half a dozen light flat cars, such as contractors use, to carry my oil to the wharf. I bought a lot of old iron rails some time ago that were discarded by the C. & B. railroad at about the cost of old iron. The men will be here Monday to grade the line and lay the rails."

"You're doing things up brown, aren't you?"

"I'm going to discard transportation by barrels, too."

What are you going to use in place of them?"

"Tanks."

"Tanks?"

"Yes. I am having half a dozen scows built which are to be equipped with oil tanks. These, towed by a small tug I am also having built, will take the place of the three sloops now in commission."

"I thought you had a year's contract with the owner of the sloops?"

"I have. But I have received reliable information through the Independent refinery people that this man has come to an arrangement with the trust by which, for a consideration, he is going to throw up the contract and leave us in the lurch."

"When?"

"On the tenth of next month, after he receives his check for services rendered up to the end of this month."

"My father told you to look out for trouble in the transportation branch."

"Well, I've been on the lookout, and am hustling to meet the emergency. The trust won't make anything by this

move. I shall have improved transportation facilities in spite of their little game."

"You are smart, upon my word, Harry," replied Phil, admiringly.

"Remember, what I have told you is in strict confidence."

"Sure. You know you can depend on me not saying a word."

"I trust you because we are old friends," said Dane.

"I guess you'll never regret your confidence."

"I hope not."

"All these improvements must cost a heap of money."

"They will."

"Are you making enough out of your oil to stand it?"

"No. We are going to put a mortgage on the property."

"Isn't that kind of risky?"

"Not at all. We've got five wells in operation so far, with a sixth nearly ready to shoot and a seventh under way. We haven't struck a dry hole so far, which shows there is a lot of oil down below. I am sure there is oil-bearing rock under mother's farm, too. It is also likely that there is oil under your father's place, also."

"I heard him say he intended to investigate the matter after a little time."

"I am satisfied this is an oil-bearing district, and I am working to keep the trust out of it altogether," said Harry. "I am arranging now to form a company, to be called the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company."

"Why, are you going to build a refinery, too?" asked Phil, in surprise.

"No. The Independent refinery at Liberty is going to take a big block of stock in the enterprise, and will turn in their works in place of cash at a fair valuation."

"How long since you started this plan?" asked Phil, wonderingly.

"Only a few days ago."

"How are you going to sell the stock?"

"I have spoken to fifty of our neighbors, and every one is going to take some shares."

"I suppose my father is in it?"

"He is. The shares will be sold at par—one hundred dollars, payable in ten per cent. installments on call. Mr. Hale has agreed to take one hundred shares, and he will be one of the incorporators. All the people of the district on whose property oil has already been found are going to sign iron-clad agreements for a term of years with us to transport and refine their entire product, which we will afterward ship to market and sell throughout the country in opposition to trust oil, through channels already in operation by the Independent refinery."

"Gee whizz! You are going to make a big business out of this thing."

"That's what I'm aiming at. I shall be the president and general manager of the company."

"That's fine. But can't you work me into this business somehow?" asked Phil, eagerly.

"I'll take care of you, Phil. I'm going to make you superintendent of transportation, old fellow, as soon as my oil fleet goes into commission."

CHAPTER XI.

A RACE WITH DEATH.

AFTER the first of the month Harry had all kinds of trouble getting the three sloops to carry his oil to Liberty.

One of them was reported to have sprung a leak and sunk at her moorings at Liberty in an unaccountable manner.

Harry found this was true, and it made him mad, for he guessed the secret at the bottom of it all.

The remaining vessels rendered very poor service during the ten days that intervened before payment was to be made for the past month's transportation.

He tried to find the owner in order to demand an explanation, but failed to locate him.

This convinced him that he had been wise in making arrangements for his own fleet of vessels, and he sent hurry orders for their completion.

The flat cars he had contracted for were to be equipped with tanks, and they were being built on a rush order.

After the tenth of the month the sloops disappeared from the river and transportation of the oil ceased entirely for two weeks, at the end of which time the two miles of railroad were entirely finished, and the locomotive and six tank cars were delivered at the wharf by the builder.

Two days afterward the tug appeared with the tank fleet, and the oil began to be delivered at Liberty in better shape and much cheaper than before, much to the surprise and disgust of the trust agent, who had anticipated tying the Wakeley oil people up completely.

Phil Deering entered upon his duties as superintendent of transportation, and Harry found him a thoroughly efficient and reliable assistant.

The success of Harry Dane's progressive method of getting his own oil and that of his neighbors to Liberty in spite of the trust won him the unstinted praise of the county at large, and attracted some attention from the newspapers of the State.

As the weeks went by and winter came on another well was added to the five already in operation, and the Wakeley output amounted to over two thousand barrels per month, and his gross receipts from that source were about one thousand nine hundred dollars every thirty days.

He also earned freight on three thousand barrels of oil carried to Liberty for the other producers in his neighborhood, making altogether five thousand barrels of oil his fleet of tank scows delivered per month, which was much below their capacity.

By the first of the year this output was increased to seven thousand barrels, well No. 7 on his own property adding nearly four hundred barrels to his own total.

On the first of the year the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company began business as a corporation, chartered under the laws of the State.

The capital stock consisted of ten thousand shares of a

par value of one hundred dollars each—one million dollars in all, four thousand of these shares being designated as ten per cent. cumulative preferred stock, dividends on the preferred stock being payable two dollars and fifty cents per share quarterly, commencing April 1st, and six thousand shares were designated as common.

Three thousand shares of the preferred stock were allotted as follows:

One thousand to Harry Dane for all right and title to the Wakeley property and the oil product thereof.

Five hundred shares to the owners of the Independent refinery for their plant and good-will.

Fifteen hundred shares to Lawyer Hale, Mr. Deering, six oil producers and others of Blank County for cash, which was set down as the immediate working capital.

Every one of the foregoing shares carried with it one share of the common stock as a bonus, leaving one thousand shares of preferred and three thousand shares of the common stock in the treasury for future disposition.

Lawyer Hale had the articles of incorporation drawn up by one of the ablest legal luminaries of the State, and, in order to head off the Oil Trust obtaining control of the company through purchase of a majority of the stock at any time, they provided, among other things, that stock owned by any member subsequently affiliating himself to the interests of the trust should lose its voting power to decide upon questions affecting the affairs of the company at its annual meeting of the board of directors.

The same restriction was placed upon any and all stock sold or otherwise transferred to others without the consent of the board of directors.

The control of the company was thus placed in the hands of the independents, and might not be wrested from them by any device of the Oil Trust.

Harry Dane was elected president and general manager of the company.

The former president of the Independent refinery became vice-president.

And Lawyer Hale was elected secretary and treasurer.

There were seven directors on the board, of which the Dane interests were represented by four, and therefore was in control of affairs.

The main office of the company was at Liberty, with a branch at Indianapolis.

By spring there were ten wells in full operation on the Wakeley farm, with a total output of three thousand five hundred barrels per month, and twelve wells on adjacent property, with an output of four thousand five hundred barrels, all of which was controlled by the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company, and duly marketed when refined.

Up to this time nothing more had been heard from the Oil Trust, though that corporation was, of course, fully aware of the condition of Blank County oil affairs.

One beautiful spring morning Harry had his favorite horse saddled, and he rode down to the wharf in the creek to see about the landing of a load of nitroglycerine, a considerable part of which was intended to be used in shooting a couple of new wells on the Wakeley property.

Phil Deering was in charge of affairs at the wharf when he arrived.

The explosive material had to be handled with the utmost care, and was loaded upon an ordinary flat car for transportation to its destination.

As the material was not wanted until that afternoon, and no oil was to be sent over the track for the next twenty-four hours, Harry directed the engineer of the locomotive to leave the car at a certain point on the line about a mile from the Wakeley farm, with the wheels securely blocked and its ominous red flags conspicuously displayed to warn people away from the immediate locality.

A single employee was to be left on guard as a further precaution, as the car was to stand at the highest point of the grade, where the track ran over a gentle elevation.

On his way back Harry saw that his directions had been carefully carried out.

He spoke to the man who had been left in charge of the car of explosive stuff, and warned him to be especially careful.

Then he turned his horse's head to the south and rode over to call upon a neighboring producer.

It took him a couple of hours to transact his business, and then he started to return to the Wakeley farm.

He passed within sight of the nitroglycerine car, and was astonished to see three men apparently at work about it.

"What the dickens does this mean?" he ejaculated. "It can't be that Brackett has sent for the stuff, for the 'shooter' is not scheduled to arrive until three o'clock. I don't understand, then, why that stuff should be moved."

Determined to find out the reason why the position of the car of explosive stuff was about to be altered, Harry spurred his mare forward at a rapid pace.

He kept his eyes on the car as he approached and saw one of the men leap into it and release the brake.

Then he jumped out on the ground, and the three men all went to the back of the car and began to push it down the grade.

The car naturally moved forward easily and gradually gathered headway.

The men ran with it for perhaps fifty feet and then with a final push left it to roll ahead of its own momentum.

They stood and watched it as it gained in speed and finally whirled around a curve where the line skirted a bit of wood.

Here they lost sight of the car, as also did Harry, and then they started off toward the distant high road.

"Good heavens!" cried Dane, as he observed the car being sent wild down the grade. "There's some villainy on foot!"

His hair began to rise with horror, for he knew that unless that death-bearing car could be shunted from the main track it would run at increasing speed straight into the very midst of the busiest section of the Wakeley property, where it must strike the buffers in front of the big tanks, where the tank cars, now unloading at the wharf, took on their loads, and the results of such a collision would undoubtedly be disastrous not only to the most val-

uable part of the company's property—for the five big tanks were practically full of oil at that moment—but to the lives of many of the employees who were busy at that point.

There was no switch, however, anywhere along that short line except near the vicinity of the tanks, and, even were the approach of the nitroglycerine car observed in time to be switched aside, it would collide with another pair of buffers close at hand, and the results would be almost as serious.

The only way that a great disaster could be averted was to have the car stopped gently before it reached any obstruction.

How this was to be accomplished during so short a run, half of which was down grade, was the question which agitated Harry's mind.

Then, as he whirled his horse about and started at full speed along the back edge of the wood, the inspiration came to him that if he could reach the far corner of the wood by the time the rapidly moving car came along he might be able to swing himself from his horse to it, and then, by slowly applying the break, gradually bring the car to rest. This short cut to head off the car was possible, as the road made a long sweep, nearly doubling on itself.

"It's our only hope," he breathed, and he dug his heels into the mare's flanks and urged her forward at her topmost speed.

That portion of the curved track on which the nitroglycerine car was shooting along was hidden from the boy's eyes by the thick trees, and he had no means of judging, as he raced ahead at mad speed, whether the car was gaining upon him or not.

"Hurry, old girl," he cried to his mare, in a low, tense tone that trembled with excitement and anxiety. "Hurry! A dozen lives, perhaps, and thousands of dollars worth of property depend on our heading off that car."

He patted the animal's neck with a trembling hand and leaned well forward in his seat.

It was a wild race while it lasted.

"You're doing fine, Queenie! Faster—a little faster, old girl, and we'll win, for the car is not yet in sight, and we're almost at the edge of the woods."

The animal responded with a fresh spurt as the boy patted her sweat-covered neck for the twentieth time, and his voice poured encouragement into her backward-tilted ears.

"On, on! That's right! Now you're doing it! We'll win yet!"

The little animal tore right down on the narrow line of track, the rails of which glittered in the noon-day sun.

Harry felt himself thrill with the excitement of it all.

The mare's sides were heaving and falling, while its breath came puffing from its nostrils like exhaust steam.

Horse and rider were almost there when the nitroglycerine car shot into view.

"There she is, girl! We must catch her!" cried Harry. "We must catch her before she gets away from us!"

The mare's nose seemed to strike the rear end of the car as she dashed up to the track at breakneck speed.

With all his strength Harry turned Queenie to one side, and she swept around and dashed away in the same direction the car was speeding.

It was now nip and tuck between the animal and the car.

The mare could not do her best so close to the track on account of the uneven character of the ground at this point of the farm.

Harry almost groaned as for a moment or two it struck him that they were losing ground and that the car would surely escape him.

He saw that if he was to succeed at all he must now, if ever, make one last desperate effort to get within jumping distance of the car, and then take the most desperate and daring risk he had ever taken in his life.

"Now, then, girlie, one more spurt! Put every ounce of speed into you. It's life or death now! Go it!"

He began to apply the small fancy whip he carried to the mare's flanks with a frantic energy that startled the animal, which had never been used to such treatment.

She threw up her head in protest, but Harry was pitiless for the moment and lashed her like a mad boy.

With a snort the mare sprang forward as if she'd taken the bit in her mouth and was running blindly away out of all control.

She closed right up on the car now, inch by inch and foot by foot, while the boy struck her repeatedly to urge her to keep it up.

At last she was fairly abreast of the rapidly moving flat car that was bearing its glistening cans of liquid death down the quarter-mile stretch of track.

Right ahead were the big tanks of stored oil and the figures of the laborers moving about the platform and sheds.

Dan Brackett was looking up along the track at the approaching car and gesticulating furiously.

It was now or never with Harry Dane, and he was all there with both feet.

He detached his feet from the stirrups, rose to his knees on the mare's back, swayed there for a moment, then rose up, like a circus rider, and stood for a single instant upright on the back of the wildly galloping animal, and then he sprang out into the air toward the car.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW HARRY DANE SAVED THE DAY.

HARRY DANE landed in a sprawling position in the open space between the cans and the rear board which fenced in the back of the car.

For a moment it looked as if he would continue his flight by rolling out onto the track behind.

Fortunately he did not.

As soon as he recovered himself he rose to his feet and made his way forward between the stack of tins and the side board of the car.

Grasping the brake, he began to bring pressure on the wheels, little by little, until the speed of the "wild-cat" diminished perceptibly.

"Thank heaven!" he muttered. "All danger is over now, for I have the car under control."

Gradually the flat car came to a rest, just as Dan Brackett came rushing up the tracks from the vicinity of the tanks.

"Why, Harry Dane!" he exclaimed, as he stepped up in front of the car. "What's the matter? What's happened to the nitroglycerine car?"

"The matter is, several scoundrels—who they can be I haven't the slightest idea—sent this car loose from its moorings at the top of the grade. I saw them do it from a distance as I was returning from the Hooper property."

"Great Scott! Is it possible!" exclaimed the assistant manager, aghast.

"Their intention, without a doubt, was to wreck our property, no matter whether it cost a dozen lives or not."

"Infamous!" cried the excited man.

"I should say so."

"How many men were engaged in this terrible scheme?"

"I counted three."

"Three? You were not close enough to recognize them?"

"No."

"What did they look like?"

"Workmen, apparently. I at first thought they were some of our laborers you had sent forward ahead of time to alter the position of the car for some reason."

"I sent none of the men for any such purpose."

"Of course you did not. There is evidently a dastardly plot at the bottom of this affair."

"It certainly has all the ear-marks of it," replied Brackett, indignantly. "How did you manage to reach and stop the car?"

Harry explained in a few words.

"I thought I saw you speeding down beside it on your horse, but I could hardly believe my eyes when you rose up on the mare's back and took that flying leap."

"It was the only chance I had to board the car. Had I missed my aim the tanks and other property would have been wrecked completely."

"They would have, indeed, and many lives have been lost. You're the nerviest lad I ever met in my life," he said, admiringly.

"Nonsense! It was the least I could do under the circumstances. Many lives and the company's welfare depended on me. The risk I took was in a good cause."

"We seem to have a determined enemy who is leaving no stone unturned to bring about our ruin. We must ferret him out at any cost, for he will certainly try until he succeeds, unless we can head him off for good."

"I shall bring a detective into the case now for certain."

"That's right. We ought to have done that when the attempt was made last fall to burn us out. Say, Harry," he exclaimed, with sudden earnestness, "you say you saw three men monkeying with this car?"

"Yes."

"I believe now they were the identical three rascals we captured when the former attempt was made to do us up."

"By gracious! I never thought of that" cried the boy, in a startled tone.

"I think there can be no doubt of that fact. We are up against the same enemy, as his ready tools testify."

"But I could not swear that these are the same miscreants."

"No matter. The inference seems clear enough. Get a detective right away, and I'll wager we'll run the same three to their hiding-place, and when we get them once more into our hands it's small chance they'll have to give us the slip again."

"I'll lose no time in sifting this outrage to the bottom."

"That's right. It's altogether too serious a matter to dally with. If an agent of the trust is at the bottom of this, we'll smoke him out, and he'll get a long term in the penitentiary."

"There comes my mare, Mr. Brackett. Catch her, please."

Queenie, when suddenly relieved of her rider, had dashed away from the track for a distance till she recovered from her excitement, when she quietly turned about and trotted toward the car where she saw her young master standing.

She allowed Dan Brackett to catch her by the bridle, and then stood calmly at rest, cocking up her graceful ears when Harry spoke to her.

"You can let her go. She'll stand there all right by herself. Now, Mr. Brackett, you had better get half a dozen of our men to push this car as far back as the wood, at least, and block the wheels once more. I'm going to ride back to the top of the grade and see what has happened to the man left in charge of the car."

"He must have been surprised and overpowered," replied the assistant manager.

"I have no doubt but he was. I will have to release him. It is probable he'll be able to describe the rascals, and in this way we'll get a line on them."

"You'll find they are the same crowd we tackled that night."

"I am quite prepared to learn that your surmise is the correct one."

"You had better wait here, Harry, till I bring the men up," said Brackett, moving off toward the tanks.

"All right," replied the boy, jumping from the car and going up to the mare and taking her nose into his hands.

"You're all to the good, Queenie, girl," he said, affectionately rubbing her muzzle. "You saved the day for the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company, and you deserve a real gold medal."

The animal whinnied as if she understood his words and was in full sympathy with her young master's satisfaction over the outcome of what had promised to be a most unfortunate state of affairs.

"You shall have all the sugar you want to eat for the next month, my girl," the boy continued, with a pleased laugh at her motions. "And I'll see that you receive a vote of thanks from the board of directors at their next meeting."

"The mare shook her mane out to the light morning breeze.

"Well, we're going to ride back to the top of the grade now, for here come the men who are going to look after the car."

Dan Brackett and half a dozen stout laborers were approaching along the track.

"I'm off, Mr. Brackett," cried Harry, as he sprang into the saddle and turned Queenie's head toward the rise.

The assistant manager waved his arm, and then the young president of the oil and refining company gave his animal the signal, and away they went across the field at a smart gallop.

When Harry reached the spot where the car had stood before she had been sent down the line on her mission of destruction he saw no signs of the watchman who had been left to look after the explosive.

Dismounting, he walked the mare along by the side of the track, looking to the right and left along the ground.

At last he noticed a spot where the earth was displaced, as if there had been a struggle at this point.

"This looks significant," the boy muttered. "I wonder what they did with the man, anyhow? Maybe they tossed him into the bushes, after securing his hands and feet so he couldn't stir.

So he proceeded to beat the brush, of which there was a quantity in the vicinity.

As he drew near one particularly thick clump he heard a series of guttural sounds coming from the midst of it.

Pushing his way into the bushes, he was not surprised to discover the missing man, not only securely bound, but well gagged, too.

It did not take the boy long to release him from his painful position.

Then Harry learned some of the facts of the case.

"I was sitting on a boulder yonder in the sun, smoking my pipe, sir," explained the employee, "and keeping my eye skinned for stragglers, when three trampish-looking chaps came up the track from the direction of the creek. As soon as I saw them I warned them away, pointing to the car with its red flags and telling them it was loaded with nitroglycerine."

"Well?" asked Harry, with great interest.

"They came to a stop on the top of the rise, looked at me, and then commenced to talk together in low tones."

"What then?" inquired the boy, impatiently.

"Then they came toward me, one fellow pulling a black pipe out of his pocket and asking me for a light. I had a match or two about me and handed them to him. They stood about as close to me as you are now, sir."

"Then what did they do?"

"While the fellow who had asked for a light was striking one of the matches I noticed the others shading their eyes with the palms of their hands and looking across the meadows in all directions. 'Where's the county road?' asked the biggest chap. I turned around and pointed it out to him, when——"

"Yes," said Harry, eagerly.

"The next thing I knew the three of them suddenly seized me and threw me down on the ground. 'If you cry

out we'll do you,' cried the big fellow, displaying a nasty-looking knife menacingly. I s'posed their intentions was to rob me, though it's precious little I had about me. They made no attempt to do that, though. However, they drew bits of manilla rope from their pockets and, while two of them held me, the big fellow tied my hands and feet as you saw and shoved that handful of oakum into my mouth, after forcing my jaws apart with the point of his knife."

"They used you pretty rough."

"They did that, sir. I couldn't understand what kind of a game they were up to. Finally they carried me over to the bushes where you found me and threw me down there like I was a sack of potatoes."

"What then?" asked Harry.

"They left me there, sir, and I haven't a very clear idea what they did after that, though I had some notion that they were monkeying with the nitroglycerine car. I was skeered to death, for I was afraid they might set it off, and I wasn't out of the danger zone by any means."

"What gave you the idea they were fooling with the car?"

"I heard them knocking away the rocks we had placed to anchor the wheels."

"And then?"

"I thought I heard the car move away, though I couldn't swear to it. It must have been so, for I see she's gone. Now, for the life of me I can't understand why——"

"Would you know those men if you saw them again?"

"Sure I would."

"You could swear to their identity?"

"I could. I had a good, square look at them before they tackled me."

"What did they look like?"

From the workman's description Harry readily identified them as the three ruffians who had already given them so much trouble, and to whom Matthew Rock owed his death.

"I'll hunt those scoundrels down if it costs a lump of money. We shall never be quite safe until they are behind the bars," he mused. Then to the man he said: "You can return to the works now, my man, and make your report to Mr. Brackett."

Thus speaking, Harry mounted Queenie and rode off toward his home.

CHAPTER XIII.

ELOISE HALE.

THAT afternoon Harry Dane took the train at Prescott and went down to Liberty to have a talk with Vice-President Peters, who was the manager of the refinery.

Mr. Peters was horrified to learn of the attempt made that day to destroy the company's property at Wakeley farm.

"I will telegraph to our Indianapolis agent to send an experienced detective up here right away," he said. "As soon as he arrives I will give him a letter of introduction to you, and you can arrange matters between you looking to the capture of those scoundrels."

"I can't imagine who is at the back of this, unless some agent of the trust is taking this means to do us up without the sanction of his employers."

"I am satisfied the trust would never resort to such tactics as that. Whatever steps they take to stifle opposition are well within the law, which, of course, can be twisted in many ways when manipulated by the skilled attorneys in their pay. No, my lad, the trust has an elastic conscience, but its methods are always legal," said Mr. Peters.

It was nearly dark when Harry got off the cars at Prescott on his return home that day.

A surprise waited him at the station.

Eloise Hale, the lawyer's daughter, was waiting for him on her pony "Starlight," and she had brought down with her "Queenie."

"Why, Eloise!" cried Harry. "Is that really you? And you brought Queenie? Did Phil tell you I had gone to Liberty?"

"No. I was over to see your mother. She told me, and said your friend Phil was going to bring your mare down to the station in time to meet you."

"It seems that you have cut him out, then?" laughed the boy, with apparent satisfaction.

"I'm afraid I have. Are you sorry?" she asked, coquettishly.

"Not much. You know I'd rather ride home with you any day."

"You say that very nice."

"Don't you believe I mean it?"

"Oh, I couldn't think of disputing your word, Mr. Dane."

"Mr. Dane! Oh, come, now, what's the matter with Harry? You've always called me that ever since we were knee-high to grasshoppers."

"What a ridiculous comparison," she laughed, with girlish gaiety.

"Well, don't let me hear you call me anything but Harry; do you understand?"

"Oh, dear! I'm afraid that is altogether too familiar for me, now that you are the president of a big corporation with a capital stock of one million dollars."

"Pshaw! What's one million dollars? One of these days we'll water that so as to make it two million dollars. That's the way the trusts do, and we're of just as much importance—in my own opinion, at any rate—as some of them."

"I heard you had a thrilling adventure this morning with that nitroglycerine car," she said, with a little shudder.

"Yes. I and Queenie. She's entitled to as much credit for helping stop that car as I am. Aren't you, girlie?" he said, bending down and patting the mare's shapely neck.

The animal tossed her head in the air and whinnied.

"Why, Queenie seems to understand all you say to her," said Eloise.

"Sure she does. Why not? Most people do not really understand an intelligent horse. If they haven't souls, some of them at least possess a high order of intelligence."

"I am sure they do," agreed the charming girl.

They were now galloping along the county road at an easy pace, and dusk was fast shrouding the landscape with her gloomy mantle.

Just then they came to an abrupt turn in the highway.

Suddenly and without warning three rough-looking men sprang from the hedge and stepped into the road before them.

"Halt!" cried the biggest one, in a menacing tone.

Both horses shied at the three apparitions.

Harry reined in Queenie quickly and laid a detaining grasp on his fair companion's arm.

He readily guessed who the three men were, but he could not imagine what their object was in holding them up in the road.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Eloise, in a frightened tone, "what can these men want?"

"Don't be alarmed, Eloise," whispered Harry. "I will deal with them."

The tall man advanced and extended his arm to grasp Queenie by the bridle.

The mare resented this familiarity and backed away.

One of the other fellows made a similar movement toward Starlight, and the animal shied so violently as almost to unseat his lovely mistress.

"Let the girl go on," ordered the leader of the party, impatiently. "Come, young man, get off that horse, or we'll pull you off."

"What do you want?" demanded Harry.

"None of your blamed business what we want. We want you, that's all."

"Don't you know such conduct will warrant your arrest?"

The man laughed sneeringly.

"Tell that to the marines. We know who you are, and we have a little bone to pick with you."

"Well, if it comes to that, I know who you are, in a way. I know you are the rascals we arrested on the Wakeley property and who afterward got away from the lock-up."

"Oh, you know that, eh?" chuckled the fellow, in an unpleasant way. "Well, we ain't denyin' it. Your old, one-hoss jails couldn't hold us two minutes when we made up our minds to walk out."

"You won't find it so easy to escape next time," said Harry Dane, boldly.

"Wait till next time comes," snarled the man.

"It will come sooner than you think, my fine fellows," said the boy, stoutly.

"I don't think," retorted the rascal, contemptuously.

"You'll find out what I say is true. You three are the scoundrels who sent the nitroglycerine car down our track this morning. You are a murderous lot, I must say."

"Ha!" gritted the fellow, savagely. "We'll make you wish you'd kept a civil tongue in your cheek," and he made a dash at Queenie's head.

Somewhat to Harry's surprise the mare didn't shy or back away this time.

She reared right up and fairly sprang at the rascal, without any urging on the boy's part.

Her steel-shod hoofs struck him squarely in the chest, and down he went as though he had been struck by lightning.

Harry was quick to take advantage of this opportunity to escape.

"Come on, Eloise," he cried, excitedly. "Whip up Starlight, and ride these rascals down if they attempt to stop you."

The girl applied her riding-whip to her animal's flanks in so smart a way that the horse dashed ahead at the same moment Queenie did.

The villains, taken by surprise, jumped out of the way, and the girl and the boy were beyond their reach in another moment.

"What a fortunate escape!" cried Eloise Hale, as the pair dashed down the road at a high speed.

"I should say so," replied Harry. "Did you ever see anything like Queenie? She jumped on that man of her own accord."

"You don't mean it!" replied the girl, in some astonishment.

"It's a fact."

"Why, I thought you made her do that."

"Not a bit of it. She took me quite by surprise. She's a knowing animal."

"I should think she was," said the girl, as they slowed the animals down to a steady pace once more. "Why did those men stop us, I should like to know?"

"Their object was to treat me to a game of rough-house, I guess," replied Harry, grimly, "as this is the second time I've put a spoke in their wheels, when I prevented the nitroglycerine car from doing its fatal work."

"Are those the men who did that deed?" she asked, opening her eyes very wide.

"I am satisfied they are the men, though I was not close enough to them to recognize them. The evidence furnished by the man left in charge of the car, whom they overpowered, is strong enough to connect them with the outrage. I've sent for a detective to take up the case, and I expect that before many days they'll be landed in the Prescott jail, which they won't find so easy to get out of as our rural lock-up."

"I don't know what I should have done if I had met those men alone," Eloise said, with a shudder.

"I don't believe they would have interfered with you. They hold a grudge against me, and it was me they wanted."

They turned down a neighboring lane, thus making a short cut to Lawyer Hale's home, which was in the center of the village.

Eloise insisted that her escort should come in and stay to tea, which invitation, after a momentary hesitation, he gladly accepted, for the fair daughter of the secretary-treasurer of the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company was an attraction the young president of the corporation could not resist.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE CLUTCHES OF THE ENEMY.

Two days later a quiet-looking man, with sharp features and very bright eyes, called at the Wakeley farm and asked to see Harry Dane.

He was shown into the boy's office.

"Mr. Dane, I believe?" he said, in quick, decisive tones.

"Yes, sir. What can I do for you, Mr. Sharp?" looking at the card the man had presented.

The visitor produced a letter from his pocket and handed it to the bright boy, whom he had sized up at a glance.

Harry saw the enclosure bore the lithographed heading of the company's refinery branch, and he scarcely needed to read the typewritten words to inform himself that the bearer was the detective he had been expecting.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Sharp," he said, smilingly. "I hope you will be able to do something for us."

"That is the object which brings me here," replied the detective, concisely. "If you will give me the particulars, and even the slightest thing in the way of a clue, I will see what can be done toward bringing this conspiracy, if such a thing exists, to light."

Harry lost no time in putting the detective in possession of all the facts as he knew them. He also summoned Dan Brackett and the man who had been left in charge of the nitroglycerine car to give their evidence. He likewise telephoned for Phil Deering, who was at the wharf attending to the loading of the oil-tank scows.

In the course of an hour the detective learned all the facts obtainable, and promptly took his departure, promising to report as soon as circumstances permitted.

During the next few days a second tug and another fleet of tank-scows were added to the transportation equipment of the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company, for oil wells were rapidly being brought into operation in the neighborhood.

Two new producers had been added to the independent ranks, and the number of wells outside the Wakeley eight had now reached twenty, making the total product of crude petroleum carried to the company's refinery at Liberty ten thousand barrels per month, worth nine thousand one hundred dollars.

The refinery still managed to receive several thousand barrels of petroleum from the Delaware County independents, but this supply was not counted on permanently, as the trust was in almost absolute control of that section of the State's oil industry.

It was on Blank County, in what was now called the Wakeley district, that the independent company relied for its present and future supply of crude petroleum.

The independent spirit was strong there, and Harry Dane was ever watchful for the intrusion of emissaries of the trust.

No sooner was there a prospect of a new producer joining the ranks than an agreement was thrust beneath his

nose and his signature obtained guaranteeing the delivery of all oil hereinafter found on his property to the Wakeley company for the term of ten years from the date thereof.

The Wakeley company was doing a very profitable business already, although only in operation for a few months, and, besides paying its regularly guaranteed quarterly dividend of two and one-half per cent. on its outstanding three thousand shares of preferred stock, was accumulating a small surplus.

Practically it had no indebtedness on its books.

The demand for its refined oil was much greater than, under present conditions, it could supply, and the future, therefore, looked particularly rosy.

Its preferred stock was privately quoted at 110, as that was the figure at which a few shares had lately changed hands within the county.

A considerable part of its original working capital of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars was still unexpended, and it was not expected that any of the one thousand shares of ten per cent. preferred remaining in the treasury would be sold for some time, and when such a course became necessary it was expected to fetch at least one hundred and twenty-five dollars per share, which would naturally raise all the outstanding preferred stock to that figure.

As to the common stock, which had not cost its owners a penny a share, it was believed it would by the end of the year begin to pay a small and thereafter increasing dividend.

In fact, judging from the present outlook, the common stock promised to be in the long run the biggest dividend-payer of the two.

After the hold-up on the county road of Harry Dane and Eloise Hale the three rascals who were so badly wanted for their crimes seemed to have taken to cover, for Mr. Sharp, the detective, failed to discover a single clue to their whereabouts.

Harry, however, had established a vigilant watch upon the company's property, for he wasn't taking any chances whatsoever.

The weeks passed away and summer was on again, bringing increased business to the Wakeley interests, as wells continued to be opened up all about the immediate neighborhood, and the monthly shipment to the refinery had risen to fifteen thousand barrels of the crude oil.

The Oil Trust, evidently unaware of the voting restrictions in the company's articles of incorporation, made Mrs. Dane an offer of one hundred and fifty dollars per share cash for her son's block of stock, hoping by this tempting offer to get control of the new company.

The offer, of course, was refused, but even had it been accepted the trust would not have attained its object.

One evening, two weeks after this offer had been turned down, Harry Dane and his chum, Phil Deering, were standing on the enlarged wharf on the creek, in earnest conversation over the contemplated additions about to be made to the company's transportation fleet.

A third half-dozen tank-scows was in course of comple-

tion, and was expected to be put in commission within a few days, and Phil's duties would be correspondingly enlarged.

Three scows lay alongside the wharf at that moment, ready to be loaded in the morning, and three others were moored further up the creek, awaiting their turn, while Tug No. 2 was anchored midway between the two sections.

The other six tank-scows, with Tug No. 1, were at Liberty.

There was a watchman on each section in the creek.

It was a dark, sultry night, with electrical disturbances in the sky to the southeast.

Suddenly out of the darkness behind the boys three crouching figures made their appearance, and advanced so noiselessly that neither Harry nor Phil became aware of their presence on the scene until both of them were seized and thrown down on the wharf without the least regard for their feelings.

A rough hand upon the mouth of each of the boys prevented them from making an outcry, and in a brief space of time they were securely bound and gagged.

"Now I reckon we've got yer where we want yer," snarled a coarse voice in Harry Dane's ear, and he did not need a light to inform him that he and Phil were in the power of the three rascals whose criminal career they had vainly been trying to cut short.

CHAPTER XV.

CONCLUSION.

THE boys were dragged aboard the nearest scow and carried into a sheltered space under a sort of narrow deck in the after part of the boat, and there left in charge of one of the scoundrels, while the other two went in search of the watchman, who happened at the moment to be in the leading scow of the three.

He was surprised and disposed of where he was not likely to interfere with the plans of the rascals, and the pair of villains returned to their young prisoners.

A lantern was lighted and the boys propped against one of the sides of the scow.

"Now," began the leader of the disreputable trio, addressing Harry Dane, "we're got yer where ther hair is short. What's ter hinder us from tying a rope with a stone at ther end of it around yer necks and droppin' yer both inter ther crik, same as folks treat a batch of kittens what ain't wanted around? How do yer like the prospect?"

The fellow chuckled grimly.

Of course, neither Harry Dane nor his chum liked the prospect at all, but the gag in their mouths prevented them from expressing any opinion on the subject.

"P'raps yer think we don't know yer've had a detective 'round these diggin's ever since we sot thet nitroglycerine car loose tryin' ter spot us, eh? Well, what good did it do? Did yer ketch us? I reckon thet ain't the first detective we've been up ag'inst."

The fellow wagged his head with an ugly grin.

"Now, how much money will yer shell out ter save yer life and thet of yer friend here? Ef yer will agree to stump up a couple of thousand plunks apiece to us we'll let yer off. Yer've got plenty of the stuff and don't need it half so bad as we do. That's the only chance yer got for yer lives—see?"

The speaker grinned viciously.

"Will yer promise not to yell out nor give an alarm in any way if I take the gag from yer mouth so yer kin answer me? If it's a go, wag yer head. If yer refuse, I'll stick you with this afore yer goes to ther fishes," and the rascal drew an ugly looking knife and flourished it before the boy's eyes. "Now, then, do yer promise?"

Harry, unable to see his way to any other course, nodded.

"Yer sensible for once in yer life," grunted the man, approvingly, laying down the knife so he could take the gag from the boy's mouth.

"We'll git right down to bizness afore we're interrupted, as mayhap we might be," he continued, with an ugly leer. "Jerry, you go out on the wharf and keep yer eye skinned for trouble."

The fellow addressed as Jerry accordingly arose from his haunches and disappeared outside into the darkness of the night.

"Now, then, will yer swear on this here Testymint,"—and the scoundrel brought forth a small copy of the New Testament that he had provided himself with for the present emergency, which the gang had no doubt been looking for a suitable chance to put in operation—"that yer'll draw six thousand dollars from yer bank inside of three days and leave the money where I tell yer to, and thet yer'll agree thet neither of yer will mention what has occurred ter-night in this here neighborhood between us, nor attempt to put the perlice onto us? Will yer swear to all thet to save yer lives?"

The villain thrust his gleaming eyes close to Harry Dane's and awaited his answer impatiently.

"Your demand is absurd," replied the young president of the oil and refining company.

"Oh, it is, is it?" snarled the fellow, in a nasty tone.

"Yes, it is. In the first place, you wouldn't dare to harm us, for you wouldn't risk the consequences."

"Yer seem ter know all about it," sneered the leader of the ruffians.

"In the next place," went on Harry, paying no attention to the interruption, "I have no authority to go to our bank and draw money."

"Oh, yer haven't? Ain't yer the presydent of the Wakeley Oil and Refinin' Company?"

"I am, but in name only. I am not yet of legal age to do business on my own account. Everything I do has to be transacted through my guardian."

This was news, and of a most unpleasant kind, to the rascal.

He uttered a fierce oath.

"Are yer tellin' the truth?"

"I am," replied the boy, coolly, and the man was forced to believe him.

"Then yer can't draw no money yerself?" he said, in a disappointed tone.

"Not a cent."

"But the money belongs to you just the same, doesn't it?"

"I am not saying it doesn't."

"Who kin draw the money? Yer guarjeon, eh? S'posin' yer wanted six thousand dollars mighty bad; all yer'd have ter do is ter ask this person to git it for yer, and the person would do it, eh? Well," triumphantly, "yer want six thousand dollars now wuss than yer ever did in yer life afore, or mebbe ever will ag'in. Yer want it ter save yer life, and yer friend's life, too. I guess yer'll ask for it under sich circumstances. Yer see, I've got yer, anyhow," and he grinned with satisfaction. "Now, will yer swear that yer'll git this money and put it where we kin get it without any trouble or risk, d'ye mind?" menacingly, "or are we to drop yer both into the crik and let yer fight it out with the fishes?"

What reply Harry Dane would have given the villain, for he was undeniably in a tight place—and from what he knew of the men's records he could expect little mercy from them—we are not prepared to say; but he was fortunately saved the necessity of agreeing to their terms, for at that moment Detective Sharp, Dan Brackett and two laborers attached to the oil company quietly walked aboard of the scow and, cutting off the two scoundrels' retreat, called on them to surrender.

They were taken completely by surprise and forced to give in.

An hour later they were landed in the Prescott jail, where the detective proceeded to put the screws on them

to try and force a confession as to the identity of the party who had employed them to injure the Wakeley company's property.

He failed, however, to make them open their mouths.

In due time they were tried for their crimes and were defended by a prominent Indianapolis lawyer, who skilfully saved them from all issues but the nitroglycerine car outrage.

The evidence of the man they had overpowered in order to get at the car convicted them, and they were sent to the penitentiary for a number of years.

It was noticed that the foxy-looking individual who had made persistent offers to buy out the Dane oil interests was a constant attendant during the trial, after which he disappeared.

No further attempts were made to injure the property of the Wakeley Oil and Refining Company, and their business prospered largely as the months went by.

Oil was also found, as was expected, on Mrs. Dane's farm, and she leased it to the company on very satisfactory terms.

To-day the Wakeley company, which controls the entire petroleum output of Blank Count, Indiana, is the only real rival of the Oil Trust in the United States.

A recent press dispatch conveyed the intelligence that the company had paid two hundred and fifty per cent. to its owners from last April to the first day of January, 1906, a period of nine months, making an annual dividend rate of over 330 per cent.

The bulk of this, of course, comes from dividends on the common stock, a very large part of which is held by Harry Dane, the young president and manager, now of age and happily married to Eloise Hale, the daughter of the secretary-treasurer.

His private fortune is already estimated at considerable over a million, every dollar of which came to him out of the Wakeley farm, which he so fortunately inherited from the conscience-stricken Matthew Rock.

THE END.

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